OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER

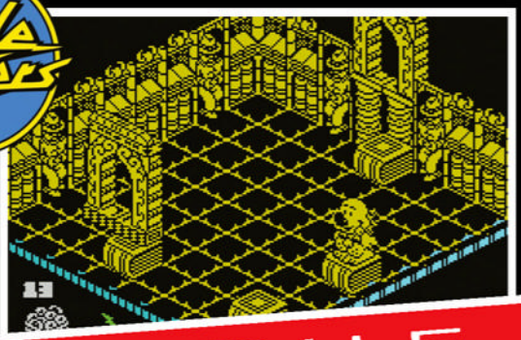
THE EVOLUTION OF RAYMAN

MICHEL ANCEL REVISITS HIS QUIRKY PLATFORMING SERIES

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

BEHIND THE SCENES OF OBSIDIAN'S TROUBLED STAR WARS PRODUCTION

Code Masters



THE LEGACY OF THE

ZX SPECTRUM

KEY CREATIVES EXAMINE THE 8-BIT MICRO'S IMPACT ON THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

FUTURE

LOAD 282

THE MAKING OF VIROCOP

INSIDE GRAFTGOLD'S FORGOTTEN AMIGA GEM

MAGAZINE CRAFT: ADAM PETERS

FROM AMSTRAD ACTION TO WORKING IN KIDS' TV

THE MAKING OF ROMANCING SAGA

AKITOSHI KAWAZU ON HIS EPIC SNES RPG

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THE NORWAY TEAM THAT TACKLED A HOLLYWOOD HIT

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SPECTRUM GAME?

DARRAN JONES

I'll have to go with *Sabre Wulf*. Ultimate's game is colourful and slick and I still play it regularly today.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*
Favourite game of all time: *Strider*

TIM EMPEY

You see where I have *Uridium* on the flannel page? Yeah, I meant *Uridium* on the Commodore 64, it's actually got different colours!
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go.
Currently playing: *Star Wars Outlaws*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

ANDY SALTER

Mastertronic's *Rescue* was one of the few games I would regularly replay and be able to complete.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

RORY MILNE

This changes from time to time, but at the moment it's *Knight Lore*. I got Ultimate's isometric wonder not long after it came out and it still fills me full of joy to this day.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing.
Currently playing: *God Of War*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

GRAEME MASON

I'm going for Julian Gollop's *Chaos* because it's brilliant.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Huntsman*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

ANDREW FISHER

Jetpac showed Ultimate's potential with its polished arcade gameplay crammed into 16KB.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Hazard: Let Us Out*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

PAUL ROSE

Skool Daze, for the sheer bunking-out-of-lessons wish fulfilment it offered.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

MARTYN CARROLL

It always has been and always will be *Jet Set Willy*. It's the one Spectrum game I revisit regularly. A little wander around Willy's mansion is like therapy.
Expertise: Sinclair stuff
Currently playing: *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*
Favourite game of all time: *Jet Set Willy*

LOADING...

I was an Amstrad lad growing up, but even I couldn't ignore the sheer popularity of the ZX Spectrum. It was a tremendously desirable machine in the Eighties and it seemed like I was the only person I knew who didn't actually own one. It should come as no surprise then to learn that the subject of our cover feature this month is once again Sir Clive Sinclair's marvellous black box. What might be a surprise however is the focus of the feature, because this time we're looking at its impact on the UK games industry, thanks to a cracking article by Martyn Carroll.

It highlights not only the importance of the legendary 8-bit micro, but also that **Retro Gamer** still has plenty of interesting stories to tell – even on those subjects that you might think you know everything about. Here's hoping this month's feature gives you a new insight on the beloved system.

Outside of our excellent cover feature, we go behind the scenes of *Casper*, *Virocop*, *Romancing SaGa* and *KOTOR II*, speak to Michel Ancel about the origins of *Rayman* and quiz veteran musicians about creating music for the Commodore Amiga. There's plenty more retro goodness inside, but I'll let you discover it for yourself.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

CONTENTS

>> Load 282 Breathing new life into classic games

RETRO RADAR

6 **Main News**
Meet the talented Lego fan that made *WipEout* craft out of the classic bricks

8 **Mike Mika**
Discover what happened when Mike read an online cookbook

9 **News Wall**
All the latest news for you to enjoy

10 **Iain Lee**
Did you own a Binatone? Iain did, but will he buy another one?

12 **Mr Biffo**
If you like building Lego, Paul has a good recommendation for you

14 **A Moment With**
Steve Turner on the ten-year journey to create an update to *3D Space Wars*

16 **Back To The Noughties**
Martyn Carroll continues his journey, stopping off in September 2009

REVIVALS

18 **Finders Keepers**
Tim revisits an old birthday gift

40 **Ms Pac-Man**
Why Darran loves this Lynx conversion

56 **Alien Breed: Tower Assault**
Did you play this Team17 sequel?

70 **Half-Life**
Darran on his wait to play Valve's game

88 **God Hand**
Tim loves this quirky action game

112 **Sonic Unleashed**
Darran talks about the dangers of revisionist history

FEATURED

32 **Retro Gamer's Favourite... Single-Screen Arcade Gems**
From *Donkey Kong* to *Galaxians*. How many did you play?

34 **Magazine Craft: Adam Peters**
Learn how the *Amstrad Action* regular made the move to TV

48 **Classic Moments: Final Fight**
All the coolest bits from Capcom's brutal side-scrolling fighter

50 **Encore!: The Musical Magic Of The Amiga**
Meet the talented musicians who helped make the Amiga sing

64 **Covermount Corner: Official Sega Saturn #12**
James Konik is back with another great selection of games. This time the disc was actually produced by Sega

80 **Music Memories: Tomb Raider: Legend**
Troels Brun Folmann on his award-winning score and how he broke into the games industry

82 **The Making Of: Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords**
Even a short deadline and unfinished character resolutions didn't stop this epic sequel from releasing

The Legacy Of: The ZX Spectrum
Industry insiders look at the impact the 8-bit micro has had on the UK's bustling gaming scene

The Making Of: Virocop
Graeme Mason quizzes the creatives behind Graftgold's inventive Amiga action game

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72

The Evolution Of: Rayman

Michel Ancel on the mainline adventures of Ubisoft's popular limbless hero

66

The Making Of: Casper

REVIEWS

90 Birdcage
92 The Last Ninja Collection + Bonus Games
94 SNK Neo Geo Picross
94 Taxi Chaos 2
94 Trigger Happy: A Visual Celebration Of Video Game Controllers
94 Tomba! 2: The Evil Swine Returns Special Edition

ESSENTIALS

96 **Homebrew**
Andrew Fisher is back with more delightful discoveries for you to try

100 **Hot Topic: Scrap And Scroll**
Tim and Darran discuss the many scrolling fighters they used to enjoy

102 **Collector's Corner**
Faith Johnson finds another collector willing to share their precious horde

104 **My Retro Life**
Graeme Mason chats about his popular newsletter *On The ZX Spectrum*

106 **Gaming Grails: Sparkster**
Find out why this SNES-exclusive sequel now costs a pretty penny

108 **Mailbag**
It's another issue filled with lovely tributes to Nick

111 **Next Month**
If you ask us very nicely, we might give you a clue

114 **Endgame**
Darran rinses *Rolling Thunder 3* for you

58

The Making Of: Romancing SaGa

Akitoshi Kawazu on crafting his 16-bit RPG and how it's being updated for the Switch by Red Art Games

» [PlayStation 4] Playing *WipEout Omega Collection* with his son led Andre to creating his own Lego vehicles.

THE LEGO MASTER

Andre Lackmann on building iconic WipEout ships with Lego

Words by Darran Jones

CONTENTS

6 THE LEGO MASTER
Andre Lackmann on creating *WipEout* vehicles out of Lego

8 MIKE MIKA
Our resident US columnist tells us about the time he discovered *The Anarchist Cookbook* on a BBS

9 NEW WALL
All the latest news, including lots of expensive Lego *Pokémon* sets and the passing of Sega's cofounder

10 IAIN LEE
Did you own a Binatone system? Iain did and here he shares his thoughts on the *Pong* clone

12 MR BIFFO
Paul received a Lego Game Boy for Christmas and it has allowed him to reappraise the hit handheld

14 A MOMENT WITH
Steve Turner tells us about his update of *3D Space Wars*, which he has worked on for ten years

16 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
Martyn Carroll briefly touches down in September 2009

While Lego videogames have existed for decades, actual Lego sets on the subject have been a more recent addition, with the vast majority coming from Nintendo, Sony and Atari. With so many game franchises existing, it's inevitable that plenty will never be visited by Lego, partly because of commercial viability, but also due to Lego's own strict rules against violence and anything with an 18-rated nature (good luck waiting for a bust of Kratos for example).

As a result there are plenty of MOC (My Own Creation) builders out there paying tribute to classic games series, and one of them is Andre Lackmann, who has been recreating some exceptional-looking vehicles from Sony's *WipEout* series. "I'm old enough to have been a PlayStation gamer, so I've been into *WipEout* since the beginning," he tells us. "It was such a fresh approach and an amazing example of what the original Playstation could do, what's not to like? I'm also a big fan of the Designers Republic – so the marriage of their graphic treatment, club culture and gaming just hit all my sweet spots."

» Andre Lackmann has been a fan of *WipEout* for decades and used Lego to create his favourite vehicles from the popular series.

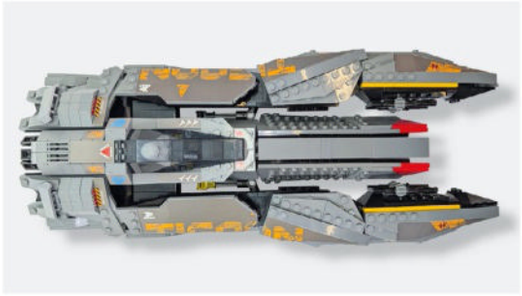
Having tinkered around with Bricklink Studio, a piece of software that lets you virtually design your own Lego creations, the end of 2025 saw Andre with time on his hands and as he was playing *WipEout Omega* with his son, a plan began to form to create some ships based on the game they both loved playing. "It was top of my mind and seemed like a good challenge that would be a fun result if I could pull it off," he says.

Andre did pull it off, and in spectacular fashion. The ships he has created so far look incredible, effortlessly capturing the elegance and coolness of the classic futuristic vehicles. Amazingly, Andre isn't a dedicated MOC builder either, telling us that outside of that aforementioned tinkering with Studio, "The AG-Systems build is my first significant build."

When you see the intricacy of the pieces that Andre has built, it won't be a surprise to learn that they required a fair amount of planning. Luckily, other Lego enthusiasts had attempted their

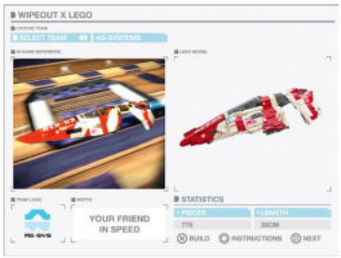
» The AG Systems ship was the first build that Andre worked on and the build instructions are available for free from andre.lackmann.net/tags/lego

> "It was lots of trial and error before getting to a model of AG-Systems I was happy with"
> ANDRE LACKMANN



» Once you buy his schematics, Andre estimates that each build costs around £75-£110 in brick pieces.

» You can see how even the underside of each craft is full of detail. Andre told us that getting the angles of each ship correct was also quite the task.



» You can see just how accurately Andre has captured the essence of each ship by visiting his blog andre.lackmann.net

» Who knew Imperial Snowtroopers were such good pilots?

own *WipEout* craft, allowing Andre a better understanding of what was required. "I took a look at how they solved various challenges with the angles and shapes that Lego really isn't suited for. *WipEout Omega Collection* has a great photo mode, so I went into the game and took a bunch of reference shots from every angle, wide and close up, so I could be as realistic as possible. From there it was lots of trial and error before getting to a model of AG-Systems I was happy with."

Andre has been using Bricklink Studio to create each ship and admits that while the build time is generally low, there's a lot to the creation process, explaining that each model can take between five and ten revisions to perfect. "I start with a rough layout and refine and refine," we're told, "Studio can output instructions, but these need layout decisions over hundreds of steps. I custom design the sticker sheet and often adjust the Studio design to match what I can do with stickers to make (or sometimes 'enhance') the in-game look. Only at the end do I order the Lego from various sellers on Bricklink and build it. Assuming that build goes fine, (sometimes there are a few adjustments), I then package everything up, take some photos, write a blog post and do all the releasing. I can take one to two months of elapsed time for each ship."

Lego, as you'll see on page nine, certainly isn't cheap and Andre kept cost in mind when creating his builds, admitting that he tries to avoid using expensive Lego pieces whenever he can. "One part of my build process is to review the cost of the builds and substitute where I can any of the rare or expensive pieces. I'd prefer to not pay $5, $10 or more for single pieces when I can just change the design. I'm sure other builders feel the same."

We were also keen to know if Andre was planning to submit his builds to Lego Ideas, an online platform where creators can have their ideas showcased and turned into official builds if they are accepted. "I haven't submitted any there (yet). To be honest, considering the really great one on Lego Ideas didn't get the 10K votes required, even with some support from some of the original *WipEout* developers and designers, I'm not sure there are enough fans still excited enough for an official Lego release."

Although an official Lego set might be a pipe dream, Andre is pleased with the interest his builds are currently generating, especially from *WipEout* creatives. "I know Tim Wright and Nick Burcombe from the original Studio Liverpool team have seen one or more and some of the design team from *Omega Collection* at Cleverbeans have too. I consider it a tribute to the game series and if [Sony] ever do come across it, hopefully they will too."

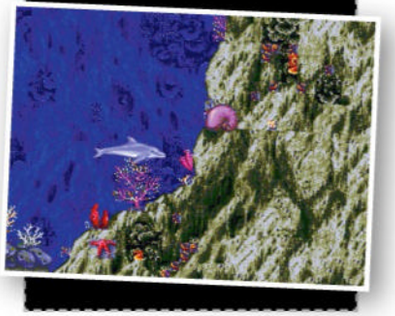
» Andre has currently completed three ships, the Van Uber (left), Tigron K-VSR (middle) and AG Systems (right).

A CLASSIC REBUILT

Fans of Geoff Crammond's *The Sentinel* will be delighted to hear that the source code is now available, allowing you to build a fully functioning version of the game from the code. Only the version from the *Play It Again Sam 6* compilation is currently available, but more are planned. The source code is available from bit.ly/sentinel_source while extra info can be found at thesentinel.bbcelite.com

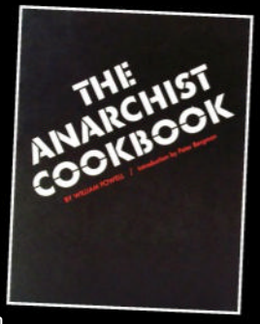
ECCO LIVES

It would appear that Sega's *Ecco The Dolphin* series will be returning, with original creator Ed Annunziata at the helm of several new projects. The news was recently announced by A&R Atelier with the developer promising that *Ecco* is "a bridge between worlds". It's unclear how much input Sega has on the incoming projects, but you can get all the latest information by visiting eccothedolphin.com



Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

Anarchy N,8,1



Bulletin Board Systems were a kind of internet before the Internet, which meant that to reach them you dialed via a 1,200 baud modem directly into another person's computer, one running BBS software twenty-four hours a day. The person running the board was the System Operator, or SysOp, and the forums reflected whatever the SysOp loved most, which was usually *Star Trek*, *D&D*, and videogames.

Almost every BBS had one forum set aside as a sort of Wild West. No rules. Total anarchy. It was in one of these boards that I encountered an artefact that carried itself with almost religious authority: *The Anarchist Cookbook*.

The book started life in the early Seventies, but by the time it began circulating on BBSes, it had taken on a strange second life. It was no longer just a book. It was a collection of "recipes" that ranged wildly from chemistry to hacking, (the version I downloaded devoted an entire section to phone hacking, or phreaking: the art, science, and subculture of exploring and manipulating telephone systems).

At this time the landscape was changing. The best new Commodore 64 games were increasingly coming from the UK. Crack intros would flash international phone numbers on the screen, daring you to call for the latest warez. There was no chance we ever would. The cost of a call long enough to download a game would have equaled the price of a car. It felt impossible. Until we read the phreaking addendum to the *Cookbook*, and tried everything in it.

It was one friend – let's call him 'Leonard', which is not his name – who noticed something important while wandering the local shopping mall: a wall of phones inside a department store that automatically dialled into a service centre. You picked one up, it waited a few seconds, and then it dialled automatically. That delay mattered.

The *Cookbook* taught us that the phone system responded to signals. Certain actions triggered automated responses meant for technicians. One of those actions caused the system to misidentify where the call was coming from. That detail became the cornerstone of our plan. If the system believed the mall phone was involved, someone standing right there could accept a third-party collect call on the caller's behalf, quietly redirecting the cost elsewhere. It was absurdly elegant. It felt like something that only worked because no one imagined anyone would try it. And worked it did.

We knew we wouldn't get many attempts before someone noticed international charges on their bill, so we made two calls. The first time, we created an account on the UK BBS and uploaded US games. Then we waited two days for verification and credit. Once verified, we were inside the gold mine. With downloads taking hours, we took only what we could justify, primarily new titles we didn't recognise. They were exciting, if slightly broken by the differences between PAL and NTSC, but playable. And most importantly, new. For a brief moment, we felt rich.

> "Once verified, we were inside the gold mine"

Then we did the math. The cost of the calls. The scale of the risk. We terrified ourselves. We didn't trade the games. I went so far as deleting my copies entirely. I wanted the feeling of subverting authority, but not the potential price of it.

I felt like Icarus, already knowing how his story ends, so I stopped. Leonard didn't stop, though – he learned to manipulate more complicated systems. He ordered stereo equipment, TVs and game systems for himself at no apparent cost. One day a large box of floppy disks arrived at my house. My parents asked how I had ordered them, and I lied instantly, saying my friend had sent them to our address because he was going to be out of town. On the way to his house, I dumped the box in a dumpster behind a pizza place.

When I confronted him, he expected gratitude. Instead, I told him I was done. I suggested he do the same. He tried to justify what we were doing, but I held my ground. To his credit, he listened.

Months later, I saw a news story about a local con artist busted by the FBI. The footage showed someone caught in the act of dumpster-diving for credit card receipts. His upper body was half-submerged in a dumpster, but I recognised Leonard's shoes immediately.

It was a thrilling chapter of my life, and a short one. Anarchy, it turns out, keeps receipts. ★

Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

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DAVID ROSEN PASSES

SEGA'S COFOUNDER DIES AT THE AGE OF 95

David Rosen, the cofounder of Sega died on Christmas Day 2025 at the age of 95, leaving behind a legacy that includes some incredibly influential games.

Rosen started off selling Japanese-created art to the American market after cofounding Rosen Enterprises in 1954. The company also specialised in Japanese identification cards and had photo studios all over Japan. In just three short years, the company's focus switched to importing amusement machines to the States and it also began operating them.

1965 saw Rosen Enterprises merging with Nihon Goraku Bussan, which specialised in selling slot machines and jukeboxes under the brand Sega (SErvice GAmes Japan).

Under Rosen's leadership, Sega Enterprises released its first arcade game, *Periscope*, in 1966 and its arcade division and focus on cutting-edge arcade games grew from there. Rosen would eventually return to the US and set up Sega Of America and stayed at Sega until 1996.

The news of his passing was quickly shared by the industry, with Sega itself posting the following message on its social channels. "We are deeply saddened to learn of the passing of David Rosen, one of the founders of Sega, and a true pioneer in the videogame industry. Sega would like to offer its condolences to the family, friends and acquaintances of Mr Rosen, and we will always remember his contributions to our company."

Our thoughts go out to all of Dave's friends and family at this very difficult time.

» Sega shared this image across its various social sites, paying tribute to the legendary industry figure.

» [PC] *Sonic The Hedgehog* wouldn't have existed without Sega, but Sega wouldn't exist without David Rosen.

PRICEY POKÉMON

NINTENDO AND LEGO ANNOUNCE NEW POKÉMON RELEASES

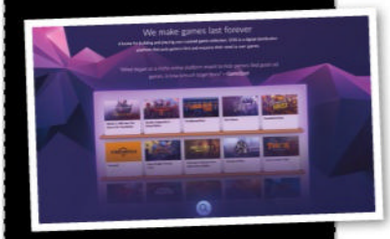
A range of Pokémon Lego was recently revealed by Lego and Nintendo and you're going to need deep pockets if you want to catch them all. They range in price from moderate to absurd and focus on the first game in the long-running series.

Eevee is the cheapest set that's currently available, with a cost of £54.99 and 587 pieces. It's a relatively straightforward build, being a very cute-looking Eevee with no extras. Pikachu is up next, featuring the adorable Pokémon jumping out of a Pokéball on a lightning-shaped base. The build consists of 2,050 blocks and costs £179.99. The final set is colossal, both in size and price. Venusaur, Charizard And Blastoise is a huge, diorama-style set featuring the three fully evolved Pokémon ready to do battle. It's a ginormous build containing 6,838 pieces but comes with an eye-watering £579.99 price tag, putting it inline with the Star Wars UCS sets. These current sets are clearly being marketed towards adults due to the perceived build difficulty and price points, so you'll be pleased to hear that other builds with kid-friendly prices are on the way.

» While these first few sets are pricey, child-friendly sets are coming.

GOG EVOLVES

It was recently revealed that GOG (Good Old Games) was sold by CD Projekt Red to Michał Kiciński, who left the company back in 2012. In a recent interview with GamesIndustry.biz, Kiciński explained that not only would purchases from the popular website remain DRM-free, but that he would be interested in remastering classic games in a similar way to Nightdive Studios. We'll have more news of this development next month.



DOCUMENTING THE C64

Nicola and Anthony Caulfield recently revealed that they are working on a brand-new retro documentary. *The Commodore 64: The Birth Of A Cultural Icon* will feature a similar structure to *The Rubber Keyed Wonder*, meaning it will speak to various creatives about the history and popularity of the machine. No tiers have been announced yet, so be sure to visit bit.ly/kickstart_icon for all the latest information.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

It's binatime, baby!

I always think my gaming journey started with *Popeye* in a Spanish bar and my beloved Dragon 32. Do not panic! This will not be another Dragon propaganda piece. Although I am considering shortening its name to the D32 to make it cool for the TikTok generation. I tend to forget I had a gaming machine before the D32 (yeah, I like that!) Somehow, we had a Binatone machine (similar to the machine above, but with more games) that lived under my parent's bed. Which when you think about it, is a bold move by Seventies parents. I wouldn't put anything my kids want under my bed…

There must have been a million versions of the Binatone. I just had a look online and ours was the TV Master MK8. This huge black and orange plastic monstrosity. It had a battered box and took the really big batteries. Were they C's? Whatever happened to the really big batteries? I miss having to hunt down six of those to get anything to work. They weighed the same as a small horse and gave one hell of a shock when you licked them. Like I say, it was the Seventies and we would find our kicks (or licks) anywhere we could.

I have no idea where this machine came from. I don't remember dad bringing it home like he did with the D32 (I am really getting into this!) What I do remember about it is I always found it kind of boring. I've never been a fan of *Pong* – too difficult and too dull. This had a mixture of other games. The two that had me confused as a kid were *Gridball* and *Squash*. Everyone played squash back in the day, but to five-year-old me squash was a disappointing drink. I still to this day have absolutely zero idea what *Gridball* is.

None of these games grabbed me and thinking about it, that surprises me. They were videogames that you played on a telly. I should have loved them. It wasn't the black and whiteness of the beast, colour TV was still a novelty back then. What did excite me for about five minutes was turning the dial half way between games and creating my own hybrid mash-ups. *Grid Basket Solo*? *Foot Hockey*? The possibilities were… well… there were seven possibilities.

I've been idly looking at these monsters online and have had to twice walk away from the screen as I put bids in on Binatones I was never going to use and did not have the space to display. Sometimes nostalgia is best left in the ether. I didn't want one in 1977 and I really don't in 2026.

> "I wouldn't put anything my kids want under my bed. . ."

I've never been sure how to pronounce it. Is it Bina, which is how I would say it, or Bina, the way I've heard some YouTubers verbalise it. I've done some digging and the company was named after the sister of the two guys that set it up. So it must be pronounced Bina. Glad I could clear that up for you! ✱

Image by Evan Amos

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Lego perfection

So, I got given one of those new Lego Game Boys as a present. You're a retro gamer. You probably know what I'm talking about. It's a perfect 1:1 scale replica of the original black-and-white Game Boy. If you like your Lego, it's a great build. If you like your retro gaming hardware, it's a warm spiral nostalgia, because it somehow manages to recapture not just the look of the Game Boy, but how it felt.

I LOVED the Game Boy, and this Lego version reminded me just how much – and why. Of course, it had the games. Christmas 1990 saw my entire family hooked on *Tetris*, passing the Game Boy around like a naughty cigarette.

Whenever I finally managed to get it back, I got lost in *Bart Simpson's Escape From Camp Deadly* – not great, but the novelty of a handheld game WITH SPEECH was enough to keep me playing – and, of course, *Super Mario Land*.

But what the Lego Game Boy has really help me appreciate is the genius of the hardware itself. Now, we all know that it wasn't perfect. The screen required you to either have built-in night vision or sit directly beneath the sun – an issue that Nintendo fixed eventually.

If you'd asked me pre-Lego Game Boy what I thought of the Game Boy's aesthetic, I'd probably have fixated on that dingy screen, and dismissed the hardware as boxy, functional and drab – almost brutalist. Following decades of ergonomic refinement in iterative joypad design, I remembered it as sitting uncomfortably in the hand.

> "The feel of the Game Boy in the hand is where it truly stands out"

But no. I was wrong. It rests beautifully in your palm. Alright, the screen could be bigger, but it's the perfect size for a handheld. It's literally pocket-size, barely larger than a modern smartphone, and just a bit wider. You can just sort of carry it around with you, and because the battery life was healthy – thanks to its lack of colour screen – you could play all day.

The feel of the Game Boy in the hand is where it truly stands out. Whether you're simply holding it or pressing one of the buttons or d-pad, clicking the power switch, turning the contrast wheel… it's intensely satisfying. Every aspect of the Game Boy likely went through scores of testing, and what they landed on was – for its time – perfect. Yet it still holds up today.

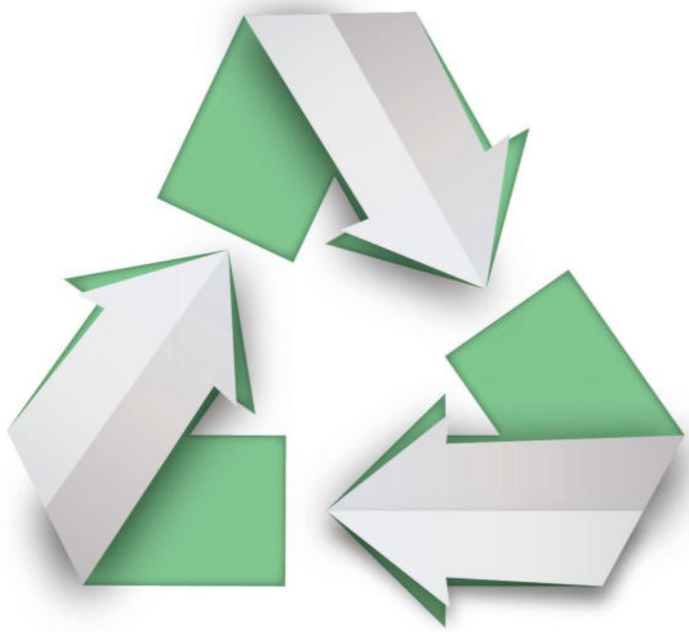
The weight of the Game Boy, with its full complement of batteries installed, coupled to how your fingers sit around it, makes it a tactile experience. It's something I could only really appreciate now, having not really, properly, held one since the Nineties – its functionality, its lack of showiness, its practicality, while also incorporating subtle flourishes, like the rounded corner, the softness of its angles… how it evoked feeling sort of throwaway and cheap while simultaneously being nothing of the sort. Gunpei Yokoi's monochrome baby displayed a confidence in itself that meant it didn't need to show off. It's sexy because it feels like it isn't trying to be.

Phwoar! Look, I appreciate this is probably all getting a little hotter and steamier than intended, and it's probably a good time for us both to take a cold shower.

Not together. Pervert.

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK | retrogamermag.bsky.social | @RetroGamer_Mag | retrogamer@futurenet.com



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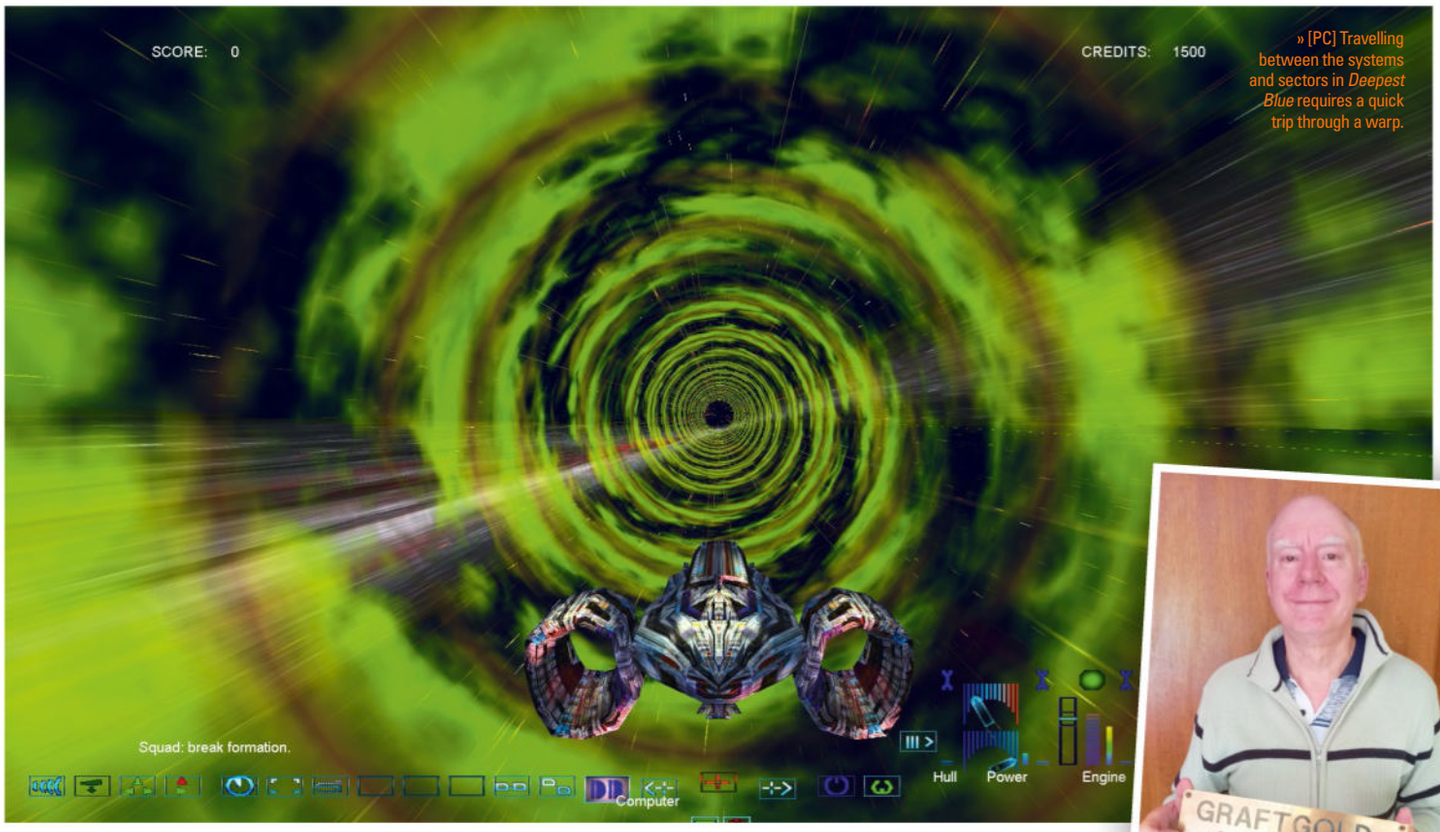


» [PC] Travelling between the systems and sectors in *Deepest Blue* requires a quick trip through a warp.

» Steve Turner spent a decade creating *Deepest Blue*, the latest title in his epic *Seiddab* series.

Steve Turner

The Quazatron and Ranarama author tells us about Deepest Blue

Words by Rory Milne

Graftgold founder Steve Turner has spent the last ten years creating *Deepest Blue*, and amazingly it runs on a basic PC. His innovative open-world space combat title boasts trading and exploration as well as blasting, and its impressive list of features, depth of gameplay and multiplayer ensure serious replay value. Steve explains how it all came about.

Why did you decide to make *Deepest Blue*, Steve?

Rob Hewson asked about doing something with the Graftgold games, and then I thought about doing something myself. I was playing *Battlestar Galactica* online and the control set-up had a real flaw. So I thought I would do a routine and send it to the developers. I ended up with this spaceship flying around with proper controls, and I'd had this conversation with Rob Hewson, so I thought why didn't I make it into a game?

> "I used to love the original Star Wars arcade game, so I wanted the fighters in Deepest Blue to be really nippy and fast"
>
> **STEVE TURNER**

How does *Deepest Blue* relate to your old games?

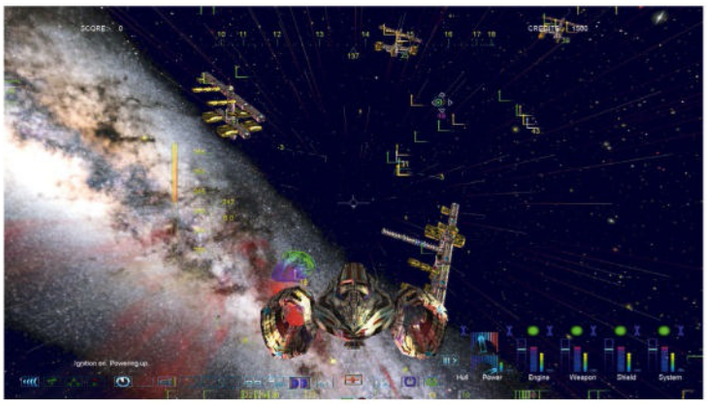
I thought I'd recreate *3D Space Wars*, and then it just grew. *3D Seiddab Attack* is referenced in *Deepest Blue*'s backstory as an attack on a huge data centre. The attack on the moon from *3D Lunattack* is also briefly mentioned. You can buy up to nine ships, each with a co-pilot. In *Dragontorc* there was a thing called 'sensory animation', and I put that in so your co-pilots have this fear and friendliness factor.

Which games influenced *Deepest Blue*?

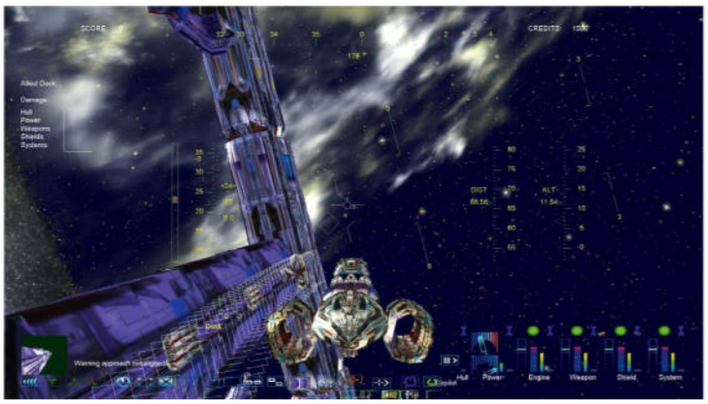
I used to love the original *Star Wars* arcade game, so I wanted the fighters in *Deepest Blue* to be really nippy and fast. I suppose the combat side of it was inspired by *Microsoft Combat Simulator*. I think where *Elite* went wrong for me was that it did the physics with no friction, so in *Deepest Blue* if you rotate then take your hands off the controls the ship stops rotating.

What are *Deepest Blue*'s different ships like?

Scout ships are fast, and they've got a low radar profile. Then mining ships are big and tough, and they're the only ones that can pick up asteroids. The biggest ship is the dreadnaught. Then you've got battleships and cruisers with gun turrets all over the place. In a lot of space games you can go right up to ships and hammer them, but not in *Deepest Blue* because I borrowed from *Uridium* and put Uridimines in!



» [PC] First impressions of *Deepest Blue* give you the distinct feeling that you're not alone in space.



» [PC] Earning credits is key to progress in *Deepest Blue*, and transporting cargo is a lucrative option.

What can you say about *Deepest Blue*'s missions?
There are all sorts of missions to sign up to. There's a mission roster where you get an estimate of how dangerous they are. When I started *Deepest Blue* I wanted it to be a free world game. I really added the missions for the autonomous AI pilots, but then I thought I'd let the player do them too, especially when I had players swapping between themselves and AI co-pilots flying their ships.

How does *Deepest Blue*'s upgrade system work?
You buy ships and add weapons to them using credits. You can change things like pulse weapons to missiles or put a moving turret in rather than a fixed turret if you're not so good at getting the enemy in your sights. But it's one of those games where you can quickly get out of your depth, because you can get reported to the enemy computer system and have a hostile mission set against you.

What about multiplayer, and the game and ship designers?
The local multiplayer is designed for a couple of players, but it goes up to four or five. I haven't tested it on the internet, but in theory it should work. I put a game designer in so you can choose how big you want each game to be. You can design your own ship from a catalogue of parts. Andrew Braybrook had that in *Morpheus*. It's similar in *Deepest Blue*, but there aren't so many modules.

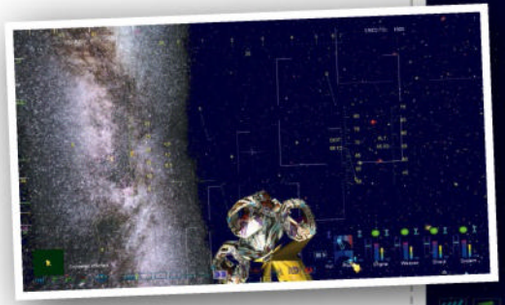
How do you know if approaching ships are hostile?
You've got a friend or foe device. You can switch it off, but then you lose the ships that are plotted on the HUD, so you're more reliant on line of sight. If you want to do a bit of pirating then that's what you have to do. But there are patrols that hunt pirates.

» [PC] The ship test mode is a recreation of Steve Turner's first game *3D Space Wars*.

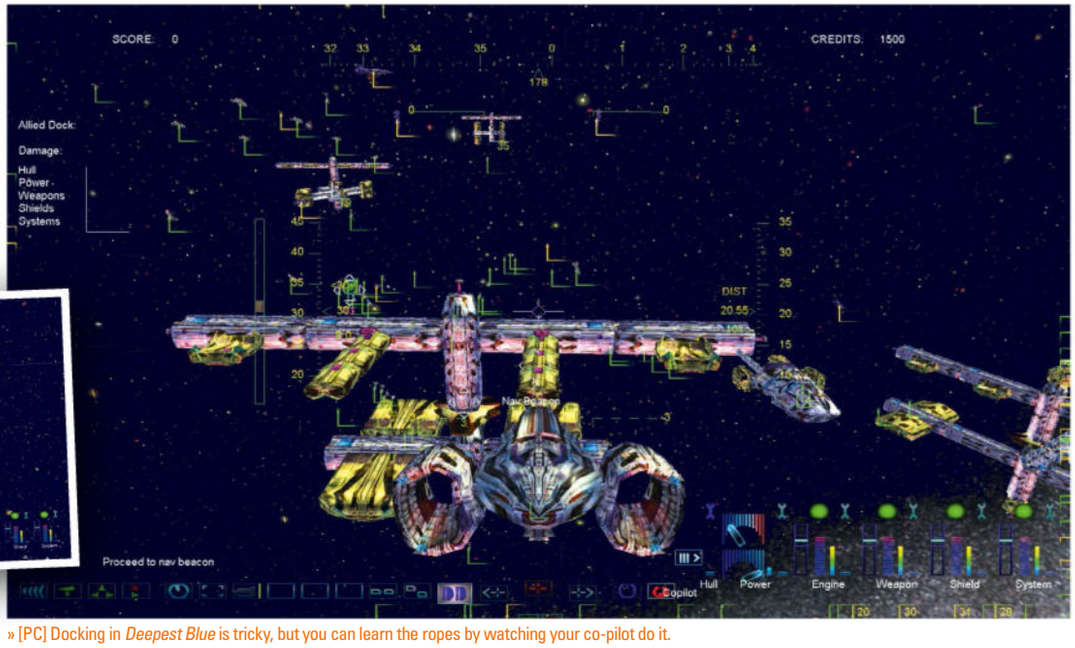
» [PC] Enemy targets are lit-up in red in *Deepest Blue*; it's up to you if you want to take them on.

How long has the game taken you to develop?
It's taken me ten years to make. I started off doing it part time just for fun, but I realised after five years that I'd have to up my hours. The last couple of years I've been making it as if it was a job. It's been crazy the last few weeks, sometimes I wasn't finishing until four o'clock in the morning. It was silly, but I just needed to knock it on the head.

When and how can people play *Deepest Blue*?
It's in prerelease now, so if you just search for *Deepest Blue* on Steam you should come up with it. I'm hoping to get it ready for full release within four weeks. I've put it out at a retro price of about £10, because I'm not trying to make a fortune. You can just fly around and have fun exploring, but like all my games there's more to unravel as you get into it. ✱



» [PC] Half the fun of mining in *Deepest Blue* comes from finding lost treasure.



» [PC] Docking in *Deepest Blue* is tricky, but you can learn the ropes by watching your co-pilot do it.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

SEPTEMBER 2009 – Sony revels in the launch of its PS3 Slim model, so Microsoft issues a four-letter response by dropping the latest entry in its most-popular franchise. Join Martyn Carroll as he steps inside Bill and Ted's phone booth and dials into the past

» [Xbox 360] The *Halo 3: ODST* campaign was no meagre offering, typically taking around six to eight hours to complete.

NEWS SEPTEMBER 2009

We begin with a story that was gold. Pure gold. On 5 September, metal detectorist Terry Herbert uncovered the largest haul of Anglo-Saxon gold ever found on UK soil. The treasure collection, dubbed The Staffordshire Hoard, was valued at a cool £3.3m.

Away from the UK, a series of natural disasters occurred in late-September. Parts of Southeast Asia were hit by two typhoons – Ketsana and Parma – which caused severe flooding and claimed more than 1,400 lives. On 29 September, a magnitude 8.1 earthquake struck near the Samoan Islands, causing a tsunami. The following day, a magnitude 7.6 earthquake occurred off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia.

In entertainment news, TV series *Breaking Bad* began to earn wide acclaim, receiving three nominations in drama categories at the 61st Emmy Awards: Outstanding Series, Outstanding Lead Actor (Bryan Cranston) and Outstanding Supporting Actor (Aaron Paul). Cranston, playing the mercurial Walter White, won his category. Finally, two celebrities passed away on the same day, 14 September: celebrity chef Keith Floyd, who suffered a heart attack, aged 65, and movie actor Patrick Swayze, who lost his battle against pancreatic cancer, aged 57.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM SEPTEMBER 2009

It's 2009 and *Halo* games are like buses, with two new entries turning up this year: the RTS spin-off *Halo Wars* in February, and now the biggest game of September, *Halo 3: ODST*. As the title suggests, this was not a true sequel but a standalone expansion of the third game, designed to keep fans happy while they waited for 2010's *Halo Reach*. It was still a full-price release however, but the new campaign (sidelining Master Chief in favour of human troopers), the debut of the Firefight co-op mode, and every *Halo 3* multiplayer map (plus three new ones) on a second disc, meant that the general consensus was that it was worth the money. Ryan McCaffrey of *Official Xbox Magazine* awarded it 9.5 out of 10, saying, "No one should have any qualms about *ODST*'s value. It's Bungie's best-designed *Halo* yet." This Xbox 360 exclusive was a sales smash, debuting at the top of the UK's all-platform sales chart and selling 2.5m copies worldwide during its first two weeks on sale.

In a beautiful bit of counter-programming, Namco chose the same street date as *ODST* (22 September) to release a PlayStation 3 exclusive – *Katamari Forever*, another of its bizarre roll-'em-ups. The *Katamari* series is seen as a comment on rampant consumerism, which is rather appropriate this month given the number of tepid tie-ins released. There were games based on *Scooby Doo*, *TMNT*, *Toy Story* and, the month's highest-grossing movie at the cinema, *Cloudy With A Chance Of Meatballs*. As the party season loomed, it was also time to dust down those plastic instruments in anticipation of *Guitar Hero 5* and *The Beatles: Rock Band*. Of the two, the latter was clearly the most interesting, on account of it being THE BEATLES, even if it was basically *Rock Band* featuring 45 hits from the Fab Four. One new element was three-player vocal harmonies, which was cool unless those taking part all sounded like Ringo. "Part music game, part Beatles memorabilia, part shop front for downloadable content," wrote Martin Kitts in his 80% review for *NGamer* magazine. "Fans will love it."

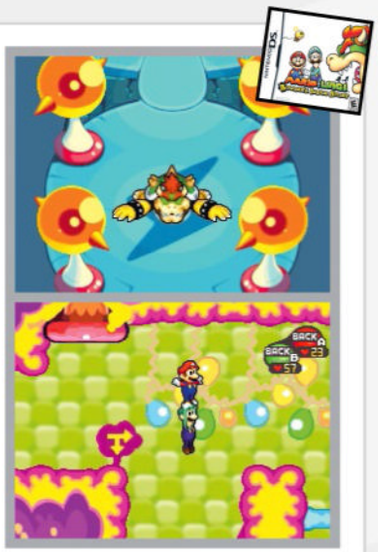
» [PlayStation 3] *Katamari Forever* was a celebration of the series, mostly made up of stages from the previous titles.

Handheld systems enjoyed another month of solid support. On the Nintendo DS, *Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story* was released in the West to wide critical acclaim, with *Nintendo Power* calling it "The best RPG-style Mario adventure ever made." The much-hyped *Scribblenauts* was also released this month, making clever use of the DS' touch-screen and stylus. Not to be left out, Sony's PSP also received some shiny exclusives. Despite the title, *Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny* arrived as a fully formed portable spin-off. It was based on its home console sibling *Soulcalibur IV*, but it added extra modes and new characters, including Kratos from the *God Of War* series, who slotted neatly into the regular roster. Also hitting the PSP this month was *Disgaea 2: Dark Hero Days*, an enhanced update of the PS2 original, and *MotorStorm: Arctic Edge*, a new entry in the off-road racing series designed specifically for Sony's handheld.

For fans of gaming on the go, this month presented a new hardware option. On 9 September, Apple released its third-generation iPod Touch. It looked the same as the previous model (obviously), but under the hood there was 50% more processing power and a new OpenGL graphics system, which turned it into a credible portable gaming device. Plus, it opened the door to the App Store and all those super cheap games like *Doodle Jump* and *Flight Control*. And from October you could also play *Canabalt*, one of the defining infinite runners, that dropped (from several stories above) as a brilliant web browser game this month.

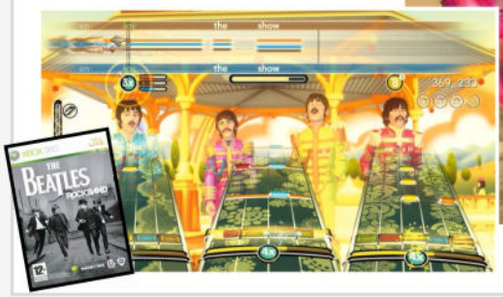
The month ended with the annual Tokyo Games Show taking place over in Japan. There were no bombshell reveals this year, but plenty of details emerged about the games we could look forward to in 2010, including *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, *Alan Wake*, *Dead Rising 2* and Yakuza 4. But let's not write off this year just yet. Come back next issue when we'll look at all the great games released in October 2009 that weren't *Wii Fit Plus* or *FIFA 10*.

» [PSP] Although it debuted on the PSP, *MotorStorm: Arctic Edge* was eventually released on the PlayStation 2.



» [DS] *Bowser's Inside Story* was the third game in the *Mario & Luigi* series of RPGs, developed by AlphaDream for Nintendo.

» [PSP] Kratos was a far better fit for *Soulcalibur* that either Yoda or Darth Vader, as seen in *Soulcalibur IV*.



» [Xbox 360] "And he wants you all to sing along…" Grab three mics and you could do just that.

CHARTS

SEPTEMBER 2009

WII

1 – **Wii Fit** (Nintendo)
2 – **EA Sports Active** (EA)
3 – **Mario Kart Wii** (Nintendo)
4 – **Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10** (EA)
5 – **Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince** (EA)

DS

1 – **Professor Layton And The Curious Village** (Nintendo)
2 – **Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince** (EA)
3 – **Pokémon Platinum** (Nintendo)
4 – **Rhythm Paradise** (Nintendo)
5 – **Mario Kart DS** (Nintendo)

PSP

1 – **Monster Hunter Freedom Unite** (Capcom)
2 – **FIFA 09** (EA)
3 – **Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince** (EA)
4 – **Resistance: Retribution** (Sony)
5 – **Need For Speed: Undercover** (EA)

MUSIC

1 – **Sexy Chick** (David Guetta ft Akon)
2 – **I Gotta Feeling** (Black Eyed Peas)
3 – **Holiday** (Dizzee Rascal)
4 – **Remedy** (Little Boots)
5 – **Run This Town** (Jay-Z ft Rihanna and Kanye West)

THIS MONTH IN…

Official Xbox Magazine

The magazine celebrates its 100th issue by compiling the top 100 Xbox games ever, as chosen by its editors. The number one? *Halo*, of course. "If not for the triumph of *Halo*, the Xbox never would have survived. It's the reason we have *everything* else."

NGamer

As Microsoft and Sony unveil their challengers to the Wii Remote, *NGamer* reports candid comments made by Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto at E3. "It feels like they have finally obtained the very basic technology for doing motion control…" That slap must still sting.

Official PlayStation Magazine

Team Ico's Fumito Ueda teases us with *The Last Guardian* talk. "We thought we could take the relationship built with Agro in *Shadow Of The Colossus* and make that the main focus." Can't wait to play it. (You'll just have to wait another seven years.)

Finder Keepers

LOSERS WEEPERS

» C64 » 1985 » DAVID JONES

It's amazing what you learn when reading Retro Gamer (and I read Retro Gamer a lot, each word, thrice over). It was only a few issues ago that I learned that the game my brother initially bought me for my tenth birthday was actually the first in a long-ish running series. I had no idea until I read it in that recent issue of the mag.

So anyway 'initially'. What happened was, my brother bought *Finders Keepers* for my birthday, but he wanted to play it first. So he kicked me out of my bedroom where the C64 was (I was pretty lucky having the computer in my room! Not sure how I wrangled that). Obviously I knew he was up to something, so I ran out to the back of the house and peered in through my bedroom window to see what he was up to. He was playing *Finders Keepers*. And I watched as he guided the Magic Knight around the screen, wishing his head wasn't so big that it covered most of the 12-inch TV we used for the computer.

Rightly miffed, I complained to my mum that my brother already played the game that was supposed to be for my birthday, and spoiled the surprise with his nefarious actions. My mum then ordered him to buy a different game for me. And he did! He bought me *Kikstart: Off-Road Simulator*, and designed a big A4 birthday card (which I have to this day) with the game Sellotaped to the front of it.

I also got to play *Finders Keepers* once all the ruckus had settled down. I don't think I got very far into it, not really understanding what I was meant to be doing in it (even though there's an introduction that explains it). My brother and I swiftly made up and enjoyed many races on *Kikstart*. [How sweet – Ed]

THE LEGACY OF THE ZX SPECTRUM

THE ZX SPECTRUM IS THE BELOVED BRITISH MICRO THAT WAS MORE THAN JUST A SALES SUCCESS – IT PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE UK GAMES INDUSTRY. JOIN US AND A NUMBER OF INDUSTRY VETERANS AS WE CHAMPION THE INFLUENCE OF THE LITTLE COMPUTER THAT COULD

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

Of all the ZX Spectrums that rolled off the production line at the Timex factory in Dundee, there was one unique edition – a single white model that was produced specially for Sir Clive Sinclair to celebrate one million sales of his computer.

This milestone was achieved in December 1983, just 20 months after the Spectrum's launch. It was a significant achievement, when you consider how many rival computers were vying for attention during the home micro boom of the early Eighties. Despite its obvious shortcomings – a rubber keyboard, single-channel sound and the infamous 'colour clash' – the Spectrum managed to strike the perfect balance between cost and capability. Crucially, it was well-specced for gaming due to its fast Z80 CPU, colour graphics and ample RAM. Thanks to sales of the Spectrum, Sinclair would become the UK's leading home-computer manufacturer, accounting for around 40% of the UK market.

"I WAS STILL AT SCHOOL WHEN I STARTED TESTING ULTIMATE'S FIRST SPECTRUM GAMES"
HUW WARD

The Spectrum's true success, however, transcends sales and smiling accountants. By making computers more affordable and accessible, it sparked a passion for programming in many users. Furthermore, it provided a low-cost path into commercial software development, creating a bedroom coding culture where individuals and small teams could create and publish their own games. It was an unprecedented time and many well-known developers and software studios emerged from the scene. The archetypal Spectrum success story is surely Ultimate, which was founded in 1982 by brothers Chris and Tim Stamper. After making their name with a string of Spectrum hits, they would establish Rare in 1985. Over the next decade the studio would achieve global success, becoming a second-party Nintendo developer and latterly a first-party Microsoft studio. It has come a long way from the small outfit that thrilled kids with games like *Jetpac* and *Atic Atac*.

One of those kids was Huw Ward of Leicestershire. "At the time I loved the Spectrum," he says. "It was my introduction to computing. I used to do what everyone else did at the time and type in code listings from magazines. Later I remember buying a snazzy special tape deck to load games." Very typical, yet the games Huw was loading were anything but. "I was still at school when I started testing Ultimate's first Spectrum games," he continues. Through a family connection, Huw found himself appointed chief – or rather, only – tester of Ultimate's latest creations. "They used to bring a new tape over each night for me to test the next day." Can you imagine? You're doing your geography homework and the Stampers pop round with a copy of a little something called *Sabre Wulf*?

Ultimate burnt brightly, but briefly, on the Spectrum. In early 1986, the Stampers sold the Ultimate label to US Gold and shifted their focus to Rare, a brand-new studio they'd set up to develop games for Nintendo's NES console. Tim Stamper later revealed that they felt they'd gone as far as they could with the Spectrum, and to ▶

» Britain's favourite boffin and 'father' of the Spectrum, Sir Clive Marles Sinclair.

» Rick Dickinson was the Spectrum's industrial designer. He created the case and the famous 'dead flesh' keyboard.

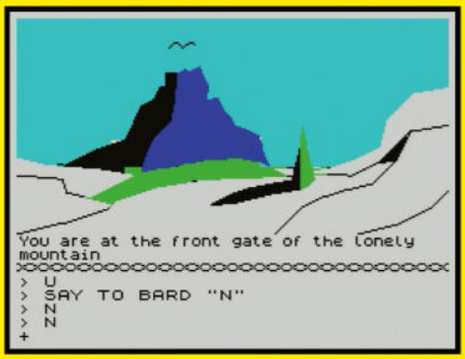
GAMES OF GREAT IMPORT

THE SPECTRUM ORIGINALS THAT INSPIRED GREAT THINGS

FOOTBALL MANAGER

1982

■ Although Kevin Toms' original version was released for the Video Genie (a Tandy TRS-80 clone), it was his expanded Spectrum version, complete with animated match highlights, that truly established the management sim formula that's still addicting footy fans to this day.



THE HOBBIT

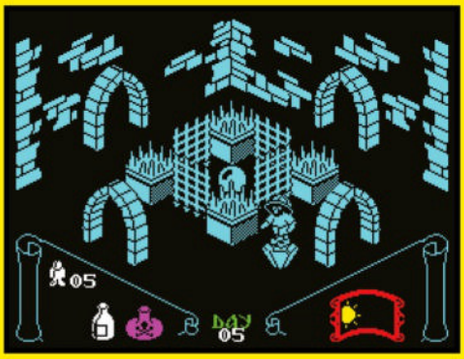
1982

■ *The Hobbit* was the title that took interactive fiction from the mainframe to the mainstream. Featuring an intelligent parser, independent characters and non-linear progression, as well as rudimentary location graphics, it set new standards for adventure games.

THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

1984

■ Mike Singleton's sprawling fantasy was billed as the first 'epic' computer game and that wasn't hyperbole. Featuring almost 4,000 locations, 32 characters and multiple routes to victory, the game was a clear and significant influence on the open-world strategy genre.



KNIGHT LORE

1984

■ *Ant Attack* brought isometric 3D thrills to the Spectrum, but it was *Knight Lore* that created the blueprint that led to countless clones, including *Fairlight* and *Head Over Heels*. Kudos to Ultimate, who casually dropped this as Sabreman's *third* adventure.

TURBO ESPRIT

1986

■ Long before the 3D open worlds of *Driver* and *GTA*, Mike Richardson created this technically superb driving game featuring living, breathing cities complete with traffic lights, zebra crossings and little workmen up ladders who you absolutely didn't try to cripple.

THE SACRED ARMOUR OF ANTIRIAD

1986

■ Displaying similarities with *Metroid*, Palace's platform-adventure game pioneered non-linear exploration on 8-bit computers. Its map was fairly small, but the level of ambition on display was huge.

HUW WARD

■ Ultimate's original game tester would go on to spend the rest of his career with Rare.

STE PICKFORD

■ Along with his brother John, Ste has enjoyed a respected 40+ year career in videogames.

CHARLES CECIL

■ Game designer Charles started out at Artic Computing and cofounded Revolution in 1989.

RUPERT GOODWINS

■ Sinclair programmer Rupert worked on the Spectrum 128 and the later Amstrad models.

JARROD BENTLEY

■ Spectrum homebrew hero Jarrod has created, and contributed to, dozens of releases.

» Rare team members outside their Twycross base. That's Tim Stamper on the far left, standing next to wife Carol and brother Chris.

THE BIG PLAYERS

STUDIOS THAT MINED GOLD ON THE SPECTRUM

ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

■ Who else? For many, Ultimate was *the* software house during the Spectrum's early years, thanks to a mostly unbroken chain of hits beginning with 1983's *Jetpac* (pictured). Just two years later, Ultimate's key people would establish Rare and global success soon followed.

ocean

■ The leading UK software house of the Eighties and early Nineties actually started out in 1983 as Spectrum Games, publishing arcade rip-offs like *Caterpilla* and *Road Frog* (pictured). Far greater things would soon follow. The Ocean name was swallowed up by Infogrames in 1998.

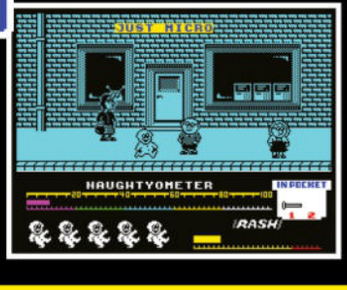
DURELL

■ The success of *Harrier Attack* and *Scuba Dive* on the Spectrum propelled this small developer into the big leagues, before hits like *Combat Lynx* and *Saboteur* (pictured) kept it there – until 1987, at least, when the firm quit games development to focus on financial software.

GRAFTGOLD Creative Software

■ Graftgold's origins stretch back to 1983, when founder Steve Turner developed *3D Space Wars* (pictured) for the Spectrum. Successful partnerships with Hewson and multiple other publishers kept Graftgold alive and kicking until circumstances saw it shut up shop in 1998.

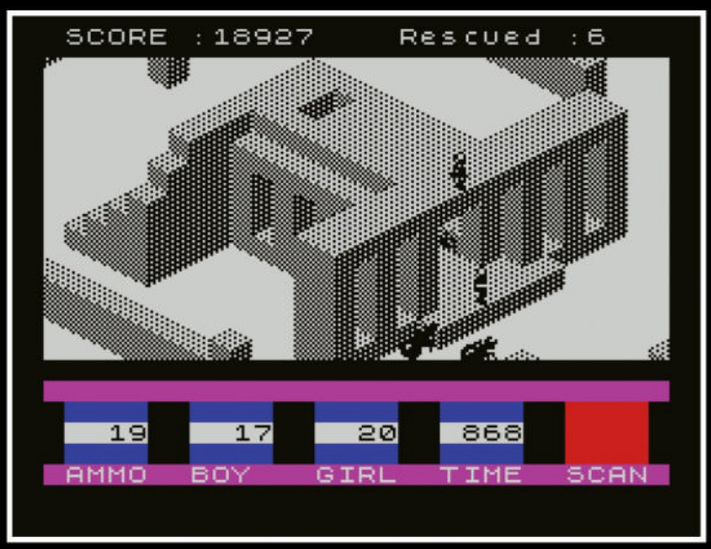
GREMLIN



■ Initially operating out of a Sheffield computer shop, Gremlin would become one of the most dependable Spectrum developers thanks to successes like *Wanted! Monty Mole* and *Jack The Nipper* (pictured). Gremlin soldiered on until 2003 and its legacy lives on in studios like Sumo.

Code Masters

■ Not strictly a Spectrum studio, but Codemasters enjoyed huge success on the system, thanks to budget-priced gems like *BMX Simulator* (pictured) and the *Dizzy* series. In the Nineties it branched out into consoles and is still active, having been acquired by EA in 2021.



» [ZX Spectrum] The ground-breaking isometric adventure *Ant Attack*, developed by Sandy White and published by Quicksilva in 1983.

» [ZX Spectrum] Mervyn Estcourt's *Deathcase* was developed for the core 16KB Spectrum, yet it's hailed as one of the system's finest games.

expand meant new (Eastern) horizons. "They went to an overseas game show and saw the opportunity in the Nintendo system," says Huw. "They already knew the late, great Joel Hochberg from when they'd worked in arcade development and he helped broker the deal with Nintendo. They grabbed it by the horns and what a great decision that was." Following the 1987 release of *Bubbler*, Ultimate's final game under US Gold, Huw hopped over to Rare, where console development was gaining momentum. Over the next five years Rare would grow into a multi-team development juggernaut that released around 60 titles for the NES, Game Boy and Mega Drive. "At Ultimate they were more of a two-man band, but at Rare the brothers had teams that they oversaw so it ended up being different," says Huw. "But saying that, Tim always liked to have design input into the games, and Chris was always interested in the engineering side." In this respect, the ethos of those early Ultimate days lived on.

One of the developers who joined Rare as it expanded was designer and illustrator Ste Pickford. He started out on the Spectrum, working alongside his brother John creating games like *Glider Rider*, *Zub* and *Feud*. It was here that he honed the skills for a life-long career in videogames. "The main lesson from working on the Spectrum and other 8-bit machines was to be lean and efficient at all times," he shares. "In modern development people talk about 'optimising' as something you do towards the end of development, to make it efficient later on. With machines like the Spectrum that wasn't possible. You had to plan with the utmost efficiency right from the start if you wanted to make a game that was going to fit into 48KB. It's a bit of a lost art now, to work that way. And perhaps a bit of a waste of time, as modern systems treat RAM and storage more dynamically. But working on the Spectrum instilled in me an instinct, and a strong habit, to make every graphic or asset as efficient as it can possibly be, and I try to never waste a single byte." He then adds, laughing, "Nobody notices though!"

» [ZX Spectrum] If we could distil the entire Spectrum scene into a single screenshot, this is undoubtedly it.

> "LOADS OF PEOPLE WHO STARTED OFF IN THEIR BEDROOMS MAKING SPECTRUM GAMES ENDED UP WORKING ON MASSIVE AAA TITLES"
> **STE PICKFORD**

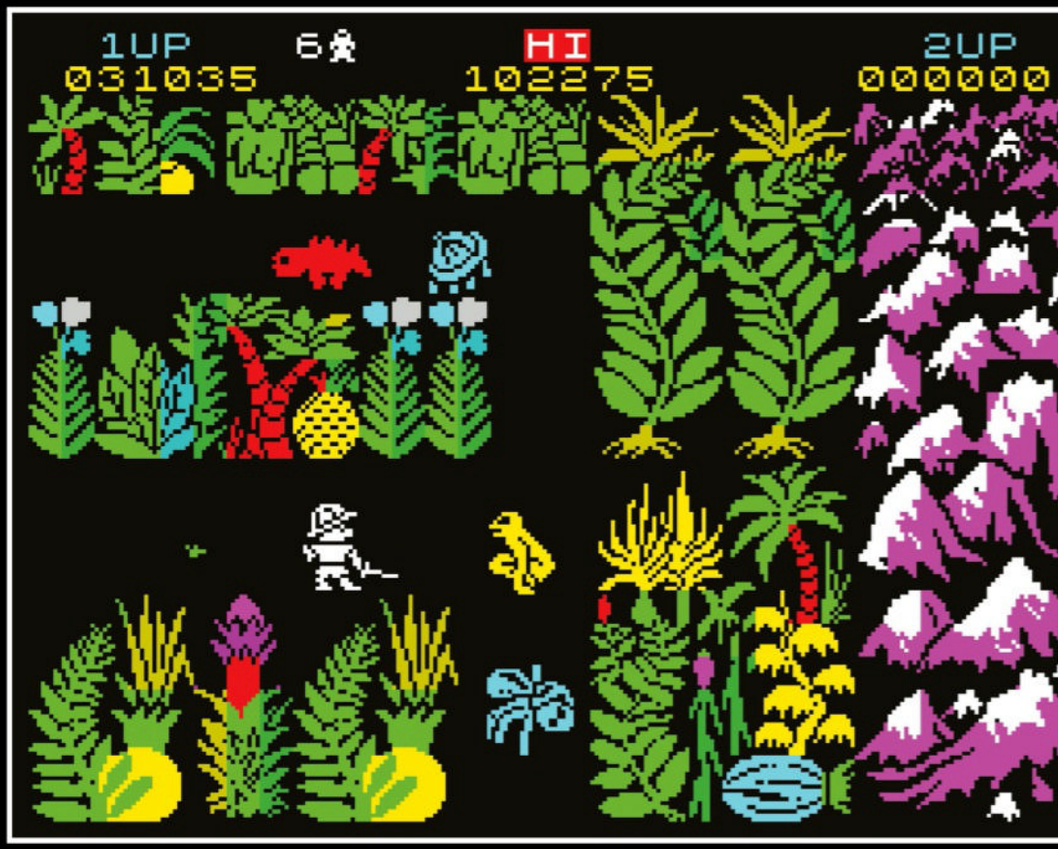
Conversely, Ste remembers things that needed to be reconsidered as the industry matured, particularly when making games for Nintendo consoles. "The move to consoles demanded a level of professionalism that we didn't have previously. It wasn't so much about bugs – although a lot of Spectrum games were buggy – it was more that Nintendo expected every game to be able to be *finished*. And the developer had to prove it could be finished, typically by providing a video of it being played to completion. When making Spectrum games we often just made the game go harder and harder, until presumably it would eventually crash. We'd play it as far as we were able, and assume better players would get further than us, but that was as far as it went. It never occurred to us that we had to be able to finish the games ourselves on the Spectrum."

Quality control issues aside, it's clear that those formative, less formal years were crucial in establishing the UK's videogame industry on the global stage – and the Spectrum played a starring role. "I point to the Spectrum in particular, more so than the Commodore 64, because it had no hardware support for sprites or scrolling or anything, and was incredibly underpowered," says Ste. "To get a sprite moving on the Spectrum was already an achievement, really, so anyone who managed to program a whole game in assembler was probably in the top 5% of developers around. Programmers and designers had to get really inventive, trying to make something work within the Spectrum's limited capabilities, and ended up making some really interesting and innovative games. Loads of people who started off in their bedrooms making Spectrum games ended up working on massive AAA titles at big studios in the US, because the Spectrum birthed a generation of incredible coders and inventive game designers."

From small acorns, as they say (and we're not talking about the Electron). Another developer who has seen great things grow from humble beginnings is Charles Cecil, cofounder of Revolution Software. Charles' story predates the Spectrum, beginning with Sinclair's first home computer, the ZX80, and Artic Computing. "Artic was started by my friend Richard Turner,

» [ZX Spectrum] *Rebelstar* by Julian Gollop was the precursor to his acclaimed *XCOM* series.

» [ZX Spectrum] *Zub* by the Pickford brothers was another of their budget titles that outshone many full-price releases.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Sabre Wulf*, starring Sabreman, was the first of Ultimate's premium big box releases

▶ whose mother offered him either a party or a Sinclair ZX80 for his 18th birthday. He chose the latter and started writing and publishing games on the ZX80 and ZX81. Other machines were available but the publishers at the time tended to stick to the formats they knew, selling games to a community that was loyal to that format. One evening, Richard pointed out that I enjoyed telling stories and suggested that if I write a text adventure game, he would code and publish it. So I did, he did, and the rest is history."

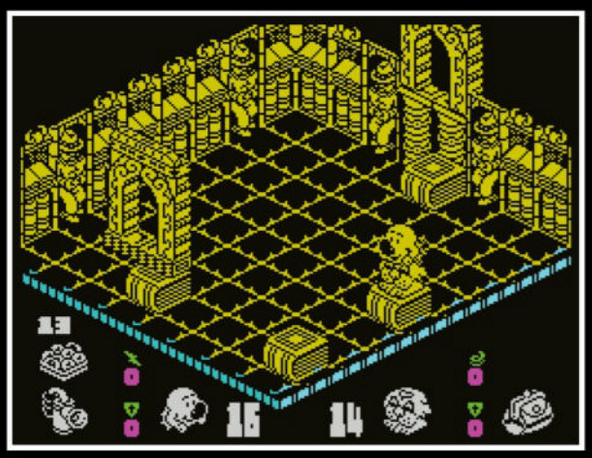
> "WE WERE THE PIONEERS. WE WERE NOT AFRAID TO INNOVATE BOTH CREATIVELY AND COMMERCIALLY"
> **CHARLES CECIL**

Charles' early adventure games – *Planet Of Death* and *Inca Curse* – helped put Artic on the map and ultimately planted the seed that led to Revolution and games like *Lure Of The Temptress* and *Broken Sword*. And Charles was able to carry forward the experience gained during those early Artic days. "We were the pioneers," he says. "We were not afraid to innovate both creatively and commercially. One example: ICL had an exclusive agreement with WHSmith, the main UK retailer at the time. The problem was that ICL was a business software company and its 'games' were dull. So one Saturday, Richard visited his local store and asked them to take some Artic games on a sale or return basis. All the games sold in a few hours and he was asked to bring more. The branch manager reported this back to head office, and WHSmith started stocking games from Artic and other publishers, and ICL games were soon withdrawn."

He continues, "The Sinclair computers were embraced by a generation of kids, like me, who were utterly captivated. In those days the television was the main source of entertainment and culture. Up to that point the information only flowed out of the television screen – it's hard to explain how exciting it was to take control of a television and display our creations. We quickly got bored of BASIC and started programming. Because it was hard, we were challenged. Extraordinarily talented programmers emerged with world class skills and creativity."

As to why the Spectrum is still so well remembered these days, Charles believes that it's much more than wistful nostalgia. "In 1982, seismic cultural changes were happening. Society was changing enormously too, driven by Margaret Thatcher and her ideologies. This created a huge cultural gap between the emerging Generation X generation and their Baby Boomer parents. We felt utterly unconstrained. The Spectrum was a huge part of this change, and to those who lived through it, the memories of that time are precious. This may explain why the Spectrum remained popular well into the late-Eighties, despite being graphically and technically way behind later computers like the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST."

The 16-bit machines Charles mentions provided an upgrade path for many Spectrum owners. Just seeing stunning games like *Defender Of The Crown* and *Shadow Of The Beast* was often enough to consign the old Spectrum to the loft space. But could things have been different, had Sinclair built on the legacy of the Spectrum? There were always whispered rumours of a 'Super Spectrum' being cooked up inside Sinclair's Cambridge labs, a computer that would disrupt the home micro market just as the Spectrum had done years earlier. Unfortunately, Sinclair's main focus was business and education users, which led to the ill-fated launch of the Sinclair QL in 1984. The commercial failure of the QL did have one upside – it forced Sinclair to refocus on what *had* worked, and that was the Spectrum. Cue the quick introduction of the Spectrum+, which added a QL-style case and keyboard. The hardware inside was the same. ▶



» [ZX Spectrum] The magnificent *Head Over Heels took* the isometric adventure to giddy new heights.

» [ZX Spectrum] *Out Run* and many other humongous coin-ops were converted to the Speccy. The results were often… mixed.

» [ZX Spectrum] The game that introduced the world to Monty Mole – and its developer Gremlin Graphics.

ZX LEGENDS

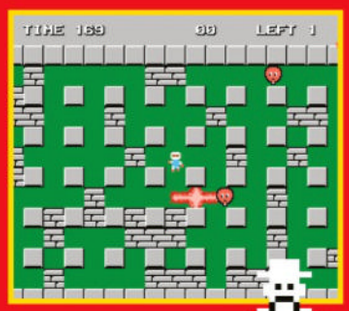
GAMING HEROES THAT WERE BORN ON THE SPECCY

MONTY MOLE

■ Peter Harrap's Spectrum version of *Wanted! Monty Mole* set the stage for the classics *Monty On The Run* and *Auf Wiedersehen Monty*. Later sequel *Impossamole* even ended up on the PC Engine (pictured). New, official entries will appear on the Spectrum and Next this year.

SABREMAN

■ Forget Jetman, it's Ultimate's Sabreman who has persisted. After appearing in four Spectrum games, he popped up in *Banjo-Tooie* and then starred in his own 2004 GBA game, *Sabre Wulf* (pictured). His nemesis, the Wulf, also inspired a fighter in the *Killer Instinct* series.



BOMBERMAN

■ Hudson Soft's hero made his *Western* debut on the Spectrum, under the alias Eric, in *Eric And The Floaters*, which was published on Sinclair's own software label in 1984. A port to the NES the following year (pictured) would see the character, er, explode in popularity.

HEAD AND HEELS

■ The two detachable doggies, the stars of Ocean's *Head Over Heels*, live on through the various remakes of Jon Ritman's masterpiece, including the recent update for the Next (pictured). There's also Colin Porch's long-gestating sequel in development for the ST and Amiga.

THE SPECTRUM REBORN

DEVICES THAT EMULATE THE SPECTRUM AND ITS GAMES

SAM COUPÉ

■ The SAM Coupé was marketed on release by Miles Gordon Technology as an upgrade path for existing Spectrum users, as it offered a (limited) Spectrum compatibility mode. However, it failed to make a dent in the micro market when it launched in 1989.

ZX TOUCH

■ Released in 2023, and banishing memories of the Vega+ debacle, this smart handheld is great for playing Spectrum games on the go. It features a 7-inch touch-screen and SD card support for loading up your own games, in addition to the homebrew titles it comes with.

THE SPECTRUM

■ It was only a matter of time until Retro Games Ltd tackled the Spectrum and it did a fine job, delivering a recreation of the rubber-keyed model that feels 'right'. For casual nostalgics it comes with 48 built-in games, including some of the best Spectrum games ever released.

SPECTRUM NEXT

■ Designed as the computer Sinclair might have made had it continued the Spectrum line, the wonderful Next features new video modes, hardware sprites and other enhancements. Aside from dedicated Next software you can run bog-standard Speccy games on it, of course.

Associates:
Welcome to
WOS
The World of Spectrum
The official world archive for the Sinclair ZX Spectrum and the largest on-line gaming center on the internet
Last update on 5th June 2001
[What's new? | Archive update (Nov 14)]
If you maintain a link to this site, please read this!
[View the guestbook | Sign the guestbook]
Spectrum Webring
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Links
Forums
Copyrights
Demo Groups
New Projects
Hardware Page
Project AY
ZX Certification
Site Awards
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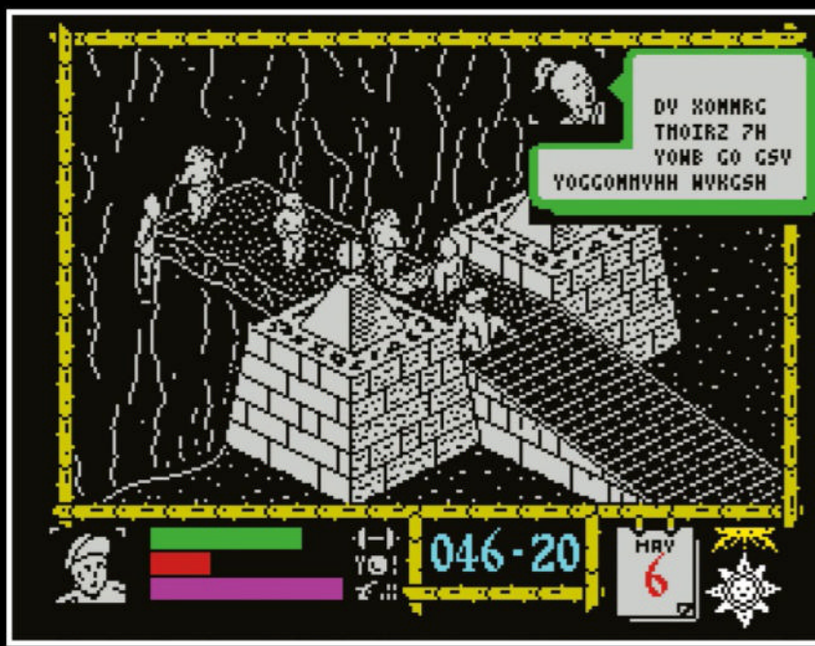
» Launched in 1995, the World Of Spectrum website brought fans together in the early days on the internet.

The Spectrum+ was a stop-gap release, pending the arrival of a genuine upgrade, the Spectrum 128. Outwardly, the 128 resembled the Spectrum+, but the hardware inside was updated, with the addition of 128KB of memory and a three-channel AY sound chip to replace the Spectrum's funny little 'beeper'. Sinclair went against type and marketed the 128 as a games machine – yet despite the extra memory and proper sound, it didn't offer any additional display modes to improve its game-playing capabilities (colour clash was part of the machine's 'Spectrumocity', it seems, and was here to stay). The 128 didn't even include a built-in joystick port. The irony here is the Timex 2068 computer – a Spectrum upgrade developed primarily for the US market in 1983 – already used a display chip that offered enhanced video modes in addition to the standard Spectrum display. Could that not have been incorporated into the 128?

Sinclair programmer Rupert Goodwins worked on the 128's system software and he believes this is wishful thinking. "The focus was on making better and cheaper hardware that made it easier and nicer to use existing software," he says. "I don't think we expected that the games industry, which was moving on from 8-bit in general, would want to spend much time writing for modes that would never be available to more than a small subset of Spectrum owners. Plus, extra modes with higher resolution aren't much good, especially for games, if they're still being driven by

» *Your Sinclair*'s irreverent and entertaining coverage would be adopted by several future videogames magazines.



» [ZX Spectrum] Too few games were developed specifically for the 128KB Spectrum. *Where Time Stood Still* from Denton Designs is the standout release.

» [ZX Spectrum] Many homebrew titles have plugged gaps in the Spectrum's library, like *The Perils Of Willy* (2020), which was previously only available on the VIC-20

a 3.5MHz Z80 with no hardware support – and once you start adding that, you're designing a new computer. Who wanted a new 8-bit computer in the latter half of the Eighties?"

We also now know that Sinclair wasn't in a financial position to innovate. The 128 was funded by Spanish distributor Investronica, and shortly after the machine's UK launch in early 1986, it was announced that the Sinclair computer business had been acquired by rival Amstrad. Would the new owners meaningfully upgrade the Spectrum? In short: no. The Spectrum +2 looked very much like Amstrad's 464 computer, with a built-in tape recorder being the obvious addition. Under the new, grey, slab-like exterior, the hardware was essentially the same as the 128's. It was released in late-1986, with the +3 disk drive model arriving the following year. "The +2 was a very quick exercise in getting costs down, freshening the brand and making it look new," says Rupert, who was the only Sinclair employee to move over to Amstrad following the sale. "Compatibility was very important, so making as few functional changes as possible kept the development costs and time to market down with minimal risk. The +3 was pretty much in mind all the time. Amstrad knew it had a commercial advantage with the 3-inch floppy drives, but as it would take longer to develop and test, the +2 had a role to play in keeping the Spectrum brand alive."

> "SINCLAIR HAD AN UNDERLYING CYNICISM ABOUT ITS CUSTOMERS – 'A GAMES MACHINE? THAT'S A BIT BENEATH OUR DIGNITY'"
> **RUPERT GOODWINS**

The Spectrum was positioned as Amstrad's low-end computer, and served to broaden its range that already included the CPC, PCW and PC lines. For Rupert, this was a simple business decision. "Amstrad did the sums and worked out how much profit it could get from the Spectrum when its supply and distribution magic was plugged in. I'm more inclined to blame Sinclair for arranging the Spectrum's drawn-out drift into obscurity. Sinclair had an underlying cynicism about its customers – 'A games machine? That's a bit beneath our dignity' – while Amstrad knew what people wanted and gave it to them. It's nice to fantasise about a world where the Spectrum evolved into something even more successful and long-running. But in the end, there's only so much you can do with architecture originally designed in 1981." ▶

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» EMAP's *Sinclair User* was the longest-running Speccy mag, published continuously between 1982 and 1993.

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» The first issue of Newsfield's much-loved *Crash* magazine went on sale in January 1984.

» [Spectrum Next] Games like *Melkhior's Mansion* on the Next keep the spirit of the original ZX Spectrum alive.

» Retro Games Ltd has launched a limited white edition of The Spectrum, complete with accompanying printer and Quickshot II-style joystick.

Amstrad would continue to manufacture the Spectrum until April 1992, meaning the production lines ran for precisely a decade. The final few commercial games appeared in 1993 and the last surviving Spectrum magazines *Sinclair User* and *Your Sinclair* closed the same year. The rest of the Nineties were largely fallow years, although there were still pockets of commercial support outside the UK, notably in Central European countries.

Of course, the legacy of the Spectrum would live on in hobbyist circles, largely driven by two developments in the mid-Nineties: the arrival of the first Spectrum emulators and the launch of the World Of Spectrum (WOS) website. Fans could now run Spectrum software on the PC and other computers, and the website provided a vast online archive of games and information. The WOS forum and comp.sys.sinclair newsgroup became home to a growing number of nostalgic 'Spec-chums' and the Spectrum community was born. Since the early Noughties, the homebrew scene has really taken flight and there are dozens of quality titles released every year. The number of releases has been amplified by DIY game creation tools like AGD (Arcade Game Designer) from Jonathan Cauldwell and La Churrera from the Mojon Twins.

"These tools are incredibly important," says Jarrod Bentley, who has been involved in both commercial Spectrum games (*Crystal Kingdom Dizzy*, *Turbo The Tortoise*) and numerous homebrew titles. "They are the homebrewer's homebrew kit, a way to get your vision out there. Trying to write your first game in assembly can be daunting. It's not for everyone. La Churrera and especially AGD take a lot of the stress away. And as you gain more confidence, you can add your own code which could lead to writing a game from the ground up. Just look at some of the sterling work programmers like Allan Turvey have done since they first started using AGD. I think the Spectrum scene is still healthy, which you can clearly see at the Crash Live community event each year. We have new Spectrum hardware to play on, new games to play with, and new software houses, like Anthony Scarfe's Northern Games producing physical copies to collect. It's great to see more people taking up the challenge, not just in coding. There are some really talented artists coming through, and also 1-bit music wizards like Rich Hollins."

> "WE HAVE NEW SPECTRUM HARDWARE TO PLAY ON, NEW GAMES TO PLAY WITH, AND NEW SOFTWARE HOUSES"
> **JARROD BENTLEY**

In mentioning new hardware, Jarrod is referring to the many modern devices you can now use to run Spectrum games, such as the ZX Touch handheld, and The Spectrum from Retro Games Ltd. There are also simple, cost-effective boards available like the ZX Pico and ESPectrum. Of course, the headline piece of hardware is the Spectrum Next, which first launched as a cased model in 2020 following a successful Kickstarter campaign. For Sinclair owners who longed for a 'Super Spectrum' back in the day, the Next effectively delivers that mythical machine – it supports original software and hardware while also bringing vastly enhanced audio and video capabilities to the table (plus the ability to run other retro systems). And, as a nod to that very special Spectrum that was produced in 1983 to recognise sales smashing the one million mark, the Next and The Spectrum are both available in limited-edition white cases.

Now, 44 years after it launched, it's clear that the legacy of the Spectrum lives on – in software, hardware, the videogames industry, and the retro community. "When I look into the Spectrum's future," says Jarrod, "I definitely need to wear shades."

» Honey, I shrunk my Spectrum. Released in 2015, the ZX Spectrum Vega was a compact plug-and-play device that fit in the palm of your hand. It came pre-loaded with 1,000 games.

GARETH NOYCE Q&A

THE CREATOR OF THE LUMO GAMES ON REVIVING THE ISOMETRIC ADVENTURE

» *Lumo* series creator Gareth Noyce is the founder of Triple Eh? studio.

Is there a title in particular that inspired *Lumo*?
Yes, Jon Ritman's *Head Over Heels*. I used to play it with a friend, taking turns. I remember making new rooms for it. That's probably when I started getting interested in game development. All of Jon's work was influential – *Batman* and especially *Monster Max* – but I've got the fondest memories of messing around in *Head Over Heels*. Bernie Drummond's art was incredible, and it felt like a real step-up, both in visual terms, and in the unique dynamics that the two characters brought to the game.

» [Switch] *Lumo* is a charming love letter to the isometric adventures of the Eighties.

In your experience, how difficult was it to develop isometric games on a Z80 computer?
It was borderline witchcraft. I never wrote an isometric engine in Z80, but the core difficulty is probably the depth sorting – working out what's in front of what. In true 3D it's fairly easy, but in 2D you have to manually decide the draw order for every single object. Jon Ritman has talked about this – he said it took him ages just to figure out how Ultimate did the sprite masking in *Knight Lore*, and even longer to crack the sorting problem. The maths isn't actually that complex, but implementing it efficiently, on a Z80, is another matter entirely.

How rewarding have you found the whole experience of developing the *Lumo* games?
The first *Lumo* was a bit tricky. I never really planned to work on it for two years. It started off as a hobby project that suddenly grew arms and legs. Everything about it was tongue in cheek, riffing on the old Eighties games and magazines. I'd get up every morning and just make whatever popped into my head. You don't get many opportunities in life to do something that niche, so I'm very thankful that people ended up liking it. I jumped on the chance to make the sequel, as it let me really lean into the elements of the first game that I had the most fun with. I was in the position where I wasn't overly worried about making something mainstream. I could make something laser-focussed on *Your Sinclair* and *Zzap!64* readers, hitting their 50s, and not worry too much about anyone that didn't get the joke.

Have any of your programming heroes reached out to comment?
I've been in the industry for nearly 25 years, and I've been fortunate to have worked with a lot of my Speccy dev heroes. The Pickford brothers were the first to give me a push to make *Lumo* – and *Zub* is always hiding somewhere in my games. Jeff Minter's a very close friend, who half the running jokes in the sequel are about. But one thing did stick out. A friend working at Rare sent me a message, on the morning of *Lumo*'s release, saying a bunch of people in the studio were playing it. So in a weird way, it went full circle, making it back, 30 years later, to where it all started.

» The lovely *Lumo* artwork was illustrated by friend of **RG**, Wil Overton.

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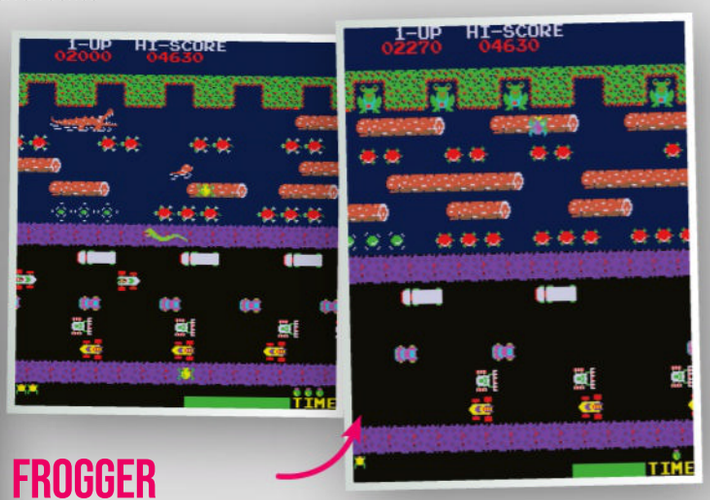
Words by Darran Jones

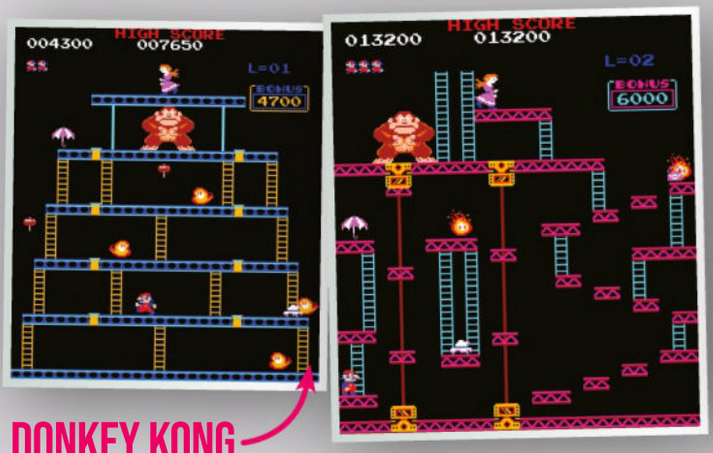
ASTEROIDS

■ Ed Logg's classic blaster remains a wonderfully tense challenge as you use skill and fast reactions to weave your way through a never-ending supply of asteroids. Cleverly, *Asteroids* actually gives you extra space to avoid the many space rocks you encounter, as your ship can wraparound the screen's edges. Just be mindful that those pesky rocks can do the same thing.



FROGGER

■ Why did the frog cross the road? Because it made Konami a lot of money. Even today, *Frogger* remains an excellent example of making a tightly designed stage out of a single screen. One lovely touch we've always enjoyed about the game, is how things get progressively more challenging for your amphibious protagonist the higher up the screen you hop.



DONKEY KONG

■ Before he found superstardom as a plumber who never does any actual plumbing, Mario was known as Jumpman and used to like battling giant apes on precarious scaffolding. Each of *Donkey Kong*'s four levels are packed with clever platforming challenges, and they're designed in such a way that Mario gets to move around most of the screen as he battles DK in his attempt to rescue Pauline.

MS PAC-MAN

■ *Pac-Man* may be the quintessential maze game for many, but we're going to have to ignore the yellow pill gobbler in favour of his partner's first outing. Bandai Namco might like to pretend that *Ms Pac-Man* doesn't exist anymore but we know better, and we also prefer its multiple mazes over the single offering found in *Pac-Man*. So there.

BUBBLE BOBBLE

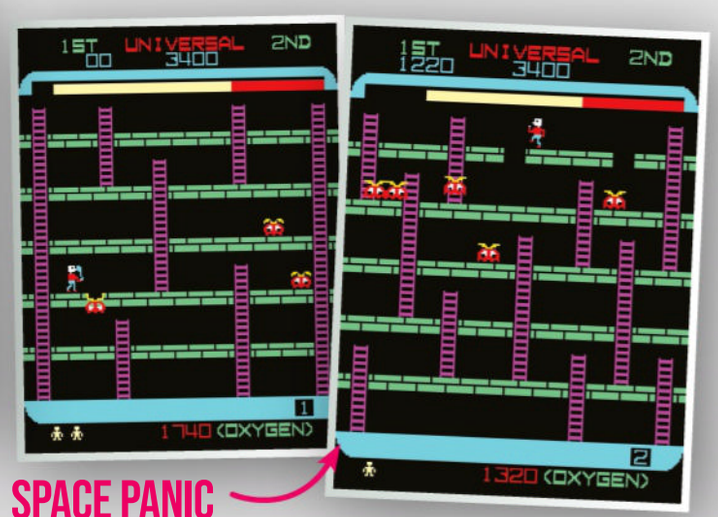
■ This joyously chaotic platformer is a genuine delight, particularly when blowing bubbles with a mate. There's a good amount of variety to the enemies you face, some of the stages are particularly challenging to navigate and there's a wealth of clever secrets to discover. It's top-tier single-screen gaming from the masters at Taito and remains an absolute classic.

BOMB JACK

■ Tehkan's magnificent bomb diffuser is one of the most agile protagonists on our list. He's able to zip around the screen with ease, which is extremely useful, as he has a large amount of annoying bombs to defuse. *Bomb Jack* is one of the few games where platforming actually slows you down, so keep to the skies and defuse those bombs!

GALAXIAN

■ *Space Invaders* wrote the rulebook for single-screen shooters, but *Galaxian* ripped it up and added a vibrant mix of fast-paced marauders and colourful sprites to the mix. While there's no denying the effectiveness of *Space Invaders*' slowly approaching aliens, the screaming, dive-bombing terrors in *Galaxian* are on another level.

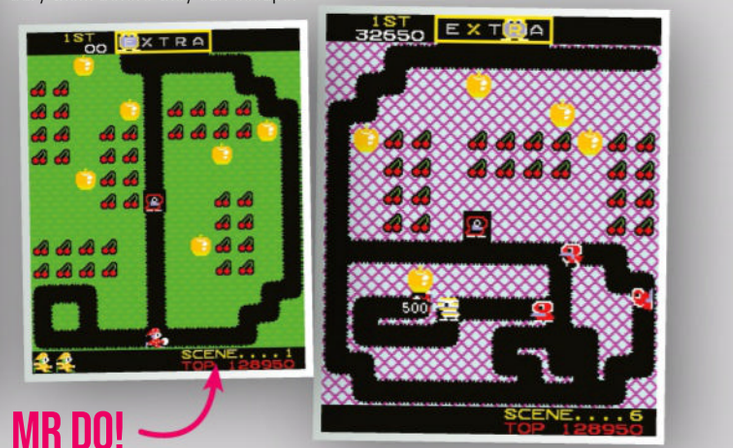


SPACE PANIC

■ Considered by many as the first-ever platform game, *Space Panic* certainly throws a lot at you. There are numerous ladders to climb, a decent number of pesky enemies to deal with and a limited amount of time to clear each stage. Luckily, you're equipped with your trusty spade, so dig some holes, trap your pursuers and bury them before they can escape.

PENGO

■ Don't be fooled by his cute looks and inability to fly, as Pengo is a stone-cold killer. We don't recall David Attenborough ever mentioning that penguins were adept at slaying Sno-Bees by slamming ice blocks into them, nor that they enjoy the melodic tune Popcorn, or had a love for diamonds. We must have fallen asleep during that particular episode.



MR DO!

■ Universal's timeless maze game is one of the best around and runs circles around Namco's *Dig Dug*. The beauty of the game is that there are so many different ways to tackle each stage, which ensures you can adapt your tactics on the fly as you play. Do you avoid enemies, grab each level's cherries, or go for a mix of the two?

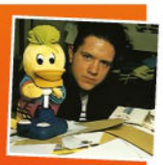
MAGAZINE CRAFT

ADAM PETERS

With his personality bursting from the pages of Amstrad Action in the Nineties, Adam Peters stint as staff writer on Future Publishing's first-ever magazine became truly memorable – not least for his double-act with editor Rod Lawton. Here, he relives his early career which also included time on other iconic magazines

Words by David Crookes

THEN



Adam was a staff writer (and de facto deputy editor) for *Amstrad Action* and he quickly became known for his sharp wit and quirky reviews. His words also sparkled on the pages of *Amiga Power*, *Total!* , *Game Zone*, *Sega Zone*, *PC Review* and *PlayStation Plus*.

NOW

Having moved into television, Adam has worked as an award-winning producer and script writer on many preschool, children and adult animations. He's also a tutor at the National Film & Television School and he edits the world's longest-running magazine about roller derby.

When did you get into computers and what did you enjoy doing with them, Adam?
We had a Binatone thingy at home but I first encountered a proper computer in 1980. I was ten and my brother was eight. Our parents were visiting another couple for the evening and their kid, Hugh, was around our age, so to save on babysitting fees we were dragged along. Whilst the adults dinner-partied, mud wrestled or whatever, we hung out with Hugh elsewhere in the mansion. This family had a super expensive Apple II and my brother and I were instantly hooked, playing various arcade-style games on it.

That must have left an impression on you?
Once our parents had finished and cleaned themselves up, they came to collect us, but we refused to stop playing. Hugh's mum eventually promised we could return next week but said invite never arrived. In retrospect, we should have let Hugh play too, but he was crying too hard to see the screen. My brother and I later shared a ZX81. He upgraded to a Spectrum, whilst (being older) I bagged an infinitely superior Amstrad CPC. Initially, I just played games plus the odd educational quiz to justify the 'it will help with my schoolwork' lie, but pretty soon I was also creating magazines using it.

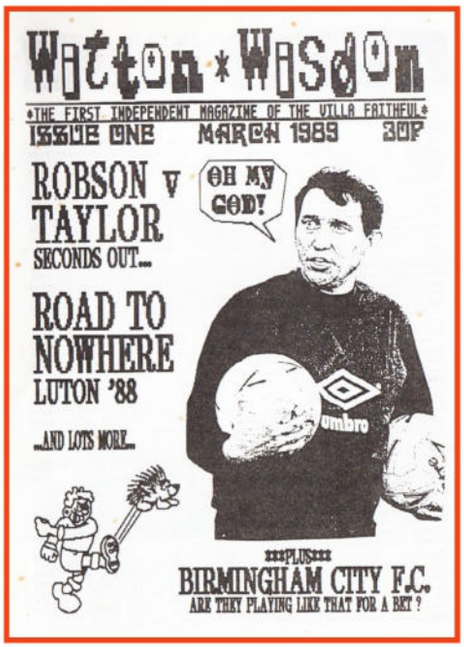
When did you first become interested in journalism and publishing?
I was a precocious brat. Mum was an educational psychologist and diagnosed me with an adult reading age (17+) when I was eight. A voracious reader, already planning to write for a living, I made hand-written magazines. In my teens, I embraced the DIY punk spirit with photocopied fanzines for schoolmates' bands. My sixth-form college had no college mag, so I launched one full of *Private Eye*-esque spoofs of tutors. College responded with a rival magazine full of angsty poetry, but I outsold them 3:1.

This DIY approach continues today. Watching my first roller derby game, I was disappointed there was no match day mag with player interviews etc. I asked the Brighton Rockers team if I could start one. *Turn Left* is now the world's longest-running roller derby magazine. I produce satirical real ale mags for charity, spoof club flyers to confuse tourists, and 5,000 leaflets for a fake candidate every general election. Such efforts are localised. Videogames magazines provided me with the opportunity to spread my nonsense to a larger, national audience.

You began freelancing for *Amstrad Action* in 1988. How did that come about?
I'd started a weird university degree where you invent your own course. Mine covered the social history and culture of football. This was the heyday of football fanzines, so I made publishing some part of my course. My sixth-form mags involved text printouts

» Adam gave readers a fascinating and detailed glimpse into how the magazine was produced.

» The infamous *Amstrad Action* Christmas panto, arranged by Adam, was given a two-page spread.



» Adam has produced a number of fanzines include the Aston Villa publication *Witton Wisdom*, produced on an Amstrad CPC.

» Adam's first appearance as a 'cover model' was issue 75 of *Amstrad Action*.

from an Amstrad CPC and Letraset, cut up and stuck to pages for photocopying. I wanted my fanzines to be more professional, so I ordered the DTP package Stop Press from an *Amstrad Action* (*AA*) advertiser. It never arrived and they kept fobbing me off on the phone. Assuming TV consumer show *That's Life!* wouldn't be interested, I turned to *AA*, expanding a moan about the mail order company into a full-page article about my fanzine. They ran it in issue 37 and the software arrived a few days later. I later sent a parody piece about editor Steve Carey, which they also printed. Emboldened, I pitched Steve a six-month series about CPC fanzine production, which he greenlit and launched with a cover photo. My first proper commission (rather than an on spec submission). Hurrah!

> "The innards of an Amstrad could be strips of liquorice, Fuzzy-Felt and sparklers for all I know"
> ADAM PETERS

How did your fanzines and your relationship with Future Publishing grow during your university days?

I support Charlton Athletic, who then had low crowds and two established fanzines, so I struggled to sell many Charlton mags. My brother followed Aston Villa and had friends there (a potential sales team). They were the only top flight team with no fanzines. I started one and it really took off. Most issues used Stop Press and Mini Office II on the Amstrad, but I later upgraded. For the final issue, I used an Apple Mac. Sorry CPCers! It was a largely full-colour A4 mag that sold almost 5,000 and was in local WHSmiths and other newsagents.

As regards to Future, I guess Steve Carey liked my writing as he twice tried to persuade me to quit uni for a full-time job. He asked if I wanted to be *AA*'s technical editor when Pat McDonald left, but the innards of an Amstrad could be strips of liquorice, Fuzzy-Felt and sparklers for all I know, so I declined and a much smarter Adam [Waring] arrived.

Steve later suggested I apply for games editor on *New Computer Express*. The thought of weekly rather than monthly deadlines terrified me. *AA* was my favourite magazine, the one I'd grown up reading, and they needed a staff writer at the perfect time. I'd just lost a dodgy election (that I was tipped to win) for a full-time job editing a student magazine. A sign perhaps that my future/Future lay in Bath not London.

Rod Lawton was editor at the time you joined the magazine as staff writer. Did you work well together?

Very much so. I've seen many comments from retro gamers about our pair up forging a golden age on *AA*. The first thing I noticed about Rod was the beard. In today's hipster era, almost everybody has a beard (including women and babies) but back then they were a rarity. I think Rod's the first person with a beard I ever spoke to. I didn't even know people with beards could speak. Where are their mouths? His wry cynicism and my exaggerated enthusiasm blended into a great double act, especially within *AA*'s gaming content.

My FAVOURITE COVER

"I'm going to have to pick 'that' infamous CPC guitar cover: *Amstrad Action* issue 85. Since we covered both games and serious apps, we had to vary the cartoony games covers with photos to keep both sides happy. We had no budget for professional models, so usually had to pose for these ourselves. My bare stomach so upset WHSmith browsers that this issue sold 4,000 fewer copies than normal. Future quickly promised to find a budget for models."

I REMEMBER WHEN

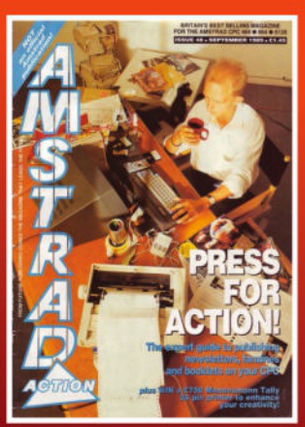
THE BIG SHOWDOWN

"Once our editors had gone home for the day, there was often an *AA* vs *Your Sinclair* showdown between myself and Jonathan Nash (RIP), my favourite games writer. The medium was chairball. This involved racing around our shared office on chairs, trying to throw a semi-inflated ball into a wheelie bin, and (on one occasion) almost beheading *YS* art editor Andy Ounsted with a falling guillotine."

» In an era of declining game releases, *Amstrad Action* needed to consider fresh ways to maintain games coverage.

My BEST INTERVIEW

"I chaired some illuminating roundtable discussions for *PlayStation Plus* on topics like the dangers of pop songs replacing dedicated composers on games. However, I'd like to pick my interview for the job on *AA*, my first ever job interview, if I may. Firstly I was steered towards outgoing staff writer Frank O'Connor who explained the role. Steve Carey, who I had written many pieces for but never actually met, said hello in passing. Frank asked how I knew Steve. Once I'd explained, Frank said, 'I suspect you've already got the job.' I'd read *Great Answers To Tough Interview Questions* on the train up. Handily, the only question in there Rod asked me was, 'What was the last book you read?' Overall I think he was just checking I wasn't a nutter. Somehow I got away with it."



» Adam's first piece in *AA* (as a freelance writer) was an article about DTP in issue 48.

» Adam beat Timmy Mallett in the Idiot Of The Year category of *AA*'s Readers' Poll. He went on to hire Timmy to voice a kids series 15 years later.

Photos of you and Rod wrestling each other being an example of that?
Absolutely. I joined *AA* full time in the summer of 1991 when CPC usage was on a sharp downward trajectory. Future Publishing itself was to some extent encouraging people to ditch their Amstrads for 16-bit machines or consoles.

A large chunk of our colour pages were forcibly given over to 'house ads' for their more profitable Amiga, ST, PC, Sega or (later) Nintendo mags. We needed to make what was left of the CPC scene look and feel as exciting as possible for our readers. Part of that came from fostering a battling community spirit. The magazine became a de facto manifesto, a secret society of Rod, Adam and *AA* readers against the [16-bit and console] world.

> "This new mag instantly started attacking AA (especially myself) in print"
> ADAM PETERS

A budget game like *American Tag Team Wrestling* would merit a half-page review at best in a 16-bit magazine. Given the sparse number of CPC games coming out (literally zero full-price games that month) we had to fill two pages. That wrestling photostory livened up the design and filled some space, whilst also progressing Rod vs Adam issue-by-issue story arcs.

See also the script of my subterranean encounter with Rod and Adam Waring disguised as turtles in a *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles 2* review. Rod looks like a fairly serious person (see beard) but he was always happy to go along with such frivolity. For the infamous *AA* Christmas Panto, I even persuaded stern-faced publisher Jane and ad manager Cheryl to join the fun. They had their revenge on the day, forcing me to cross Bath in full ugly sister drag whilst everybody else caught a cab.

The letters pages sparkled when you oversaw them. There was a lot of banter and angry correspondence, particularly from a certain Peter Worley. Did you ever meet him?
I see him quite often. Usually in the mirror since [spoilers] I wrote Worley's World. I paid a uni mate £10 to use his photo. Hopefully he didn't get any abuse in the street from *AA* readers. I often write to get a reaction (coincidentally the name of *AA*'s letters page) and Worley's letters boosted our genuine postbag as planned. I actually agree with a lot of his opinions, such as the portrayal of aliens in CPC games being speciesist. Reader call afternoons every Tuesday were another point of interaction. Rod often suddenly had a long meeting to go to, leaving me to fend off techie queries I could barely understand and readers' siblings shouting, "Amstrads suck." A microcosm of today's internet.

Amazingly, *AA*'s sales rose from 35,159 to 37,120 in April 1992 at a time when the CPC was supposedly dead. Are you taking some credit for that?
I'm taking ALL of the credit. Said rise was entirely down to me being amazing, although other staff's awesomeness probably helped too. The declining competition was another factor. Our only rival, officially licensed and grown-up *Amstrad Computer User*, shut in May 1992. Its replacement, *CPC Attack!* pitched much younger with Temu Tank Girl trimmings. I'd largely ignored *ACU* but, true to its name, this new mag instantly started attacking *AA* (especially myself) in print. I hit back and they went under after six issues. I suspect *CPC Attack!* was secretly ex-*ACU* editor Chris Knight sat in his pants at home in Cornwall. Two years later, he and I were part of a group

Aliens are people too

WORLEY'S WORLD

PETER'S POSTBAG

» An example of Peter Worley in action. Little did anyone know but his contributions were made up by Adam.

of *GamesMaster* and *Games World* TV types (often including Dominik Diamond) who pub crawled around Camden on a Friday evening. The 1992 Amstrad Mag Turf Wars never boiled over on nights out. Thank goodness as Chris was triple my height.

While working at *AA*, you were also reviewing games for *Amiga Power* and *Total!*. How did the mags compare and what was Future like back then?

There were very different daytime and evening cultures. *AA* was hidden away in one corner of the main Future offices. This multi-floor maze contained almost 20 (mostly) computer and videogames magazines. During the day, people largely sat in their own domains. Editors often left around the end of regular office hours. Junior staff freelanced for other mags late into the night to make ends meet. I was paid £8,500 when I started at *AA*. Adjusted for inflation, that's around £20,000 today, thus below minimum wage (albeit things like rent were more affordable back then). I gratefully grabbed any freelance reviews offered.

If a reader were to tour Future HQ on an evening, they might be puzzled by people's locations. *Amiga Power* would be full of 8-bit magazine staff playing games they'd been hired to review. *AP*'s own staff would be doing the same for a Sega or Nintendo mag. It was fun writing for other platforms. I could be extra critical and punky on *Amiga Power*, whilst

American tag team wrestling

» Adam encouraged the staff at *Amstrad Action* to get involved in all kinds of frivolity including a wrestling match!

NEWS feature

Going Dutch

in the second in a series of 'wired city' guides, Adam Peters travels to Amsterdam where he finds computer fairs, Virtual Reality machines and the scariest traffic system in the world.

PC REVIEW • December 1995 • 37

Nintendo mag *Total!* credited all its reviews to editor Steve Jarratt or deputy Andy Dyer, so I had to ghost-write in their styles. I also wrote for *Super Play* and did some page design for *Sega Power*. The latter tried to poach me as a full-time writer. They were astonished I wanted to stay on 'dying' 8-bit mag *AA*.

Given how much of a blast you were having and how influential you were, why did you leave *Amstrad Action*?

Late nights in the office meant late starts in the morning, which didn't match Rod's hours. Having a family life in distant Weston-super-Wotnot, he rightly stuck to a proper nine-to-five routine. The mag was suffering due to our divergent hours. I was also missing London and went back there most weekends to play gigs or attend raves. It was generally agreed I'd be happier freelancing from London than working full time in Bath.

You ended up at Dennis Publishing, working full time across *Game Zone* and

bomberman, barbie, and the big issue

» Adam married his love of music and popular culture with his videogame and computing coverage as this interview with Lush singer Miki Berenyi in *Game Zone* shows.

My BEST PRESS TRIP

"My most exotic travelogue for *PC Review* was a day in Amsterdam. They even found funds (£25) for a photographer. I hired an aspiring paparazzo I knew. I'd recently blagged Bill into a London Fashion Week party at Stringfellows where he spent five minutes drunkenly chatting to someone with the same camera before realising he'd walked into a mirror, so what could go wrong? A very rough ferry crossing left me with no sleep and Bill covered in vomit (although he was like that before departure to be honest). We went to a big PC Expo looking for games but there weren't any. Then we went to Europe's first-ever virtual reality conference in a canal-side web café. I was the only non-local journo at the press conference. They held a vote on language at the start and the whole thing ended up being in Dutch. There was just time for Bill to fall in a canal before we caught the ferry home. Best trip ever."

I REMEMBER WHEN

FOOD FLINGING

"The publisher of Future's 8-bit mags once took us all out for a meal in a swanky Mexican restaurant. The frozen margaritas flowed a bit too freely. By the time the desserts arrived, a full-blown inter-magazine food fight was in progress. I have no idea what publisher Jane said or paid to stop us being thrown out, but it was carnage. I can't remember whether *Commodore Format* or *Your Sinclair* won the fight, but *AA* certainly didn't. I was still finding guacamole in my earholes three weeks later."

» Adam covered a variety of topics for *PlayStation Plus* including tabloid controversy, banned games ads and dream games licenses.

Lots of fans give their idols gifts. Sam Saunders, 16, did exactly the opposite...
a girl's own story
"i stole robbie's pants"
knicker nicker
robbie's pants drop
"The day Robbie quit the band was one year to the day since I did it."
"The first night after I got the undies, I took them to bed with me."
panting shot
Advice

» After writing for computer and games mags, Adam had a spell gathering some quality scoops for *Just Seventeen*.

I REMEMBER WHEN

NEEDING SPACE

"The sport of chairball was threatened by *PC Format*. They already had way more space than us, but seemingly needed more. A stand-up dividing wall between us and them was moving closer week by week. It felt like being in the Death Star trash compactor. I kept moving it back when their office was empty, but to no avail. They offered me some freelance work if I stopped moving it, but I stood firm… in what little space remained to stand in."

I REMEMBER WHEN

TRIAL BY FIRE

"Hewland's *Games World* Sky TV series once held a special journalists edition of their eliminator show. Each publishing company sent a representative. Nobody at Dennis wanted to go, so *Game Zone* basically forced me to. As expected, I was the first to be eliminated. Games Animal Dave Perry won and launched his TV career. A few months later I was working at Hewland. The designer of my losing game (*Cash Dash*) told me staff sometimes took over joystick control to get rid of the least interesting contestant. True or not, I suck."

▶ *Sega Zone*. How was that?

Due to differing publication dates, I alternated fortnightly between the two magazines. Dennis was based in central London and had some great freelancers. Both mags were edited by women, which was fairly rare. A few months after starting, I arrived at work to see Steve Carey and Colin Campbell (publisher when I left *AA*) sat in reception. To me this could only mean Future was buying the mags. I tipped off my colleagues and, sure enough, an hour later we were sat in a meeting room being told our jobs were safe if we moved to Bath. I think only production editor Andy did. I was one of many who switched to freelancing. I actually did return to *GZ* full time for one week. Editor Trenton Webb asked me in as holiday cover. The sensible approach would involve a B&B, but because I'm an idiot I commuted from Brighton daily, 3.5 hours each way. I did get to construct a station-by-station livestream-esque review for *Lamborghini American Challenge* (Game Boy) as a result though.

You later freelanced for EMAP's *PC Review* and *PlayStation Plus*. How did that come about?

Working in gaming TV, I'd become matey with Rik Henderson; then The Violet Blade, now *T3* news editor. We shared a love for *Loaded* magazine's gonzo travelogues and cooked up the idea of me penning similar for his current mag *PC Review*. There were limited target locations, such as the UK's first web café in Cambridge and first net pub in Edinburgh, but it was a fun series. Obviously the clubby 20s readership of *PlayStation Plus* was a better fit for *Loaded*-style pieces. They invited me to write some lengthy features about gaming culture. These covered everything from death by videogames to interviewing spangled gamers in Ministry Of Sound. I even tried arranging deals to make Church Of England or Topless Darts PlayStation games happen. These pieces were very much of their time, but a fun twist on the usual gaming mag content.

You moved into gaming TV in 1994. What influenced that decision?

I also wanted to write for music/teen mags. My university mate Mark Frith (then editor of *Smash Hits*) told me TV was much less genre-restricted than print journalism, so I could use it as a springboard. I applied to Hewland International, makers of *GamesMaster* and *Games World*. Given my comical games reviews, they hired me for their new Big Boy Barry sitcom. I wrote the Games Mistress segments, where a lovely but stinky (her leather outfit wasn't washable) Jet from *Gladiators* vigorously worked the tips. Her scripts were rammed full of innuendo and I had to fill her mouth regularly. The questions prompting her filthy replies were filmed later using random folks, often kids who members of staff knew. Thus we sometimes had Jet seemingly flirting with young children; not the sort of thing you'd get away with now.

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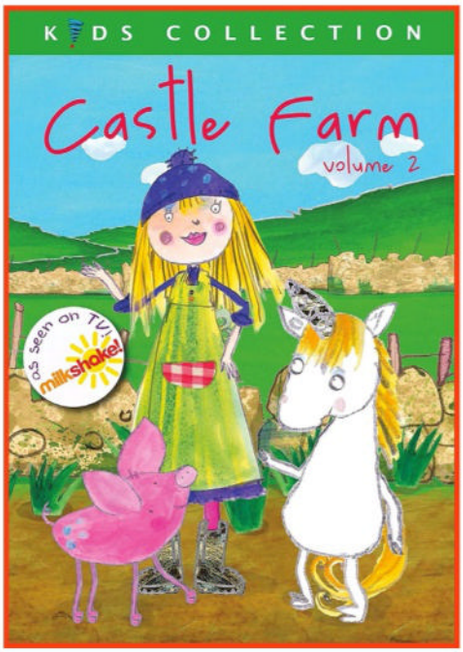
CELEBRITY GAMERS

» Adam has recently written some retro-inspired pieces for *Pixel Addict* including this cover feature

I also wrote many of the linking sitcom storylines. The series featured telly newcomer David Walliams, who annoyed me by not bothering to learn my well-crafted videogame gags, instead ad-libbing nonsense about Ewoks or Polly Pocket. Not the worst crime in retrospect. I was poached to write flagship ITV kids' sitcom *The Geeks* which featured the likes of East 17, Boyzone, Ant & Dec and Catherine Zeta Jones. I achieved my dream of switching genres, writing and directing photo love stories for *Just Seventeen* as a result, but my brief dalliance in television quickly became my main career.

You have since mostly focussed on animated series. How does that skillset differ from games journalism?
Not by as much as you'd think. Impossible Television, where I was number two across its 15-year history, was essentially a videogames company masquerading as TV producers. Most of our animators started out as games artists, for example. Our boss/owner was my *Games World* producer Peter Scott, who BBC Model B fans will know as a prolific games developer who reached 'face on the box' levels with *The Peter Scott Trilogy*. He brought me in primarily to oversee the scripts and audio. My colleague John Higgs (now the author of best-selling histories of *Doctor Who*, *James Bond* and the KLF) produced racing games for Xbox and PS2. We also brought in games journos Rik Henderson and Nick Walkland for *TooMuchTV*, an animated magazine show featuring videogame and gadget reviews. This was shortlisted for the Best Children's Programme BAFTA. We lost to *SM:TV Live*, but I got to dance with Cat Deeley in the Park Lane Hilton. Best night ever.

Did you consider trying to launch any other gaming-related shows?
We tried to get several other gaming-related shows off the ground. Channel 4 funded a pilot of *Sit.com*, a live-action sitcom about a shy gamer sharing his flat with a CG female games character. They rejected a series thus, "We're not sure this is sport after all." For some reason gaming shows fell under their head of sport's remit. We also piloted *Techtoys* for Channel 5, a show about games and gadgets featuring presenters keyed into a CG set with animated robots for company. Despite both pilots being awesome (not entirely just saying that as I wrote them) neither was picked up. With animators to feed, we moved to where the money was, producing 15 series (500-ish episodes) of preschool CG animation.

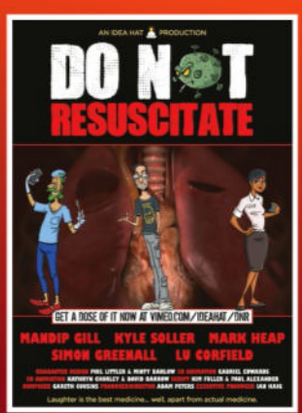


» *Castle Farm*, *MechaNick* and *The Beeps* are just three preschool animated series written and produced by Adam.

Your name has resurfaced in retro magazines. I approached you to write for one-off CPC special *Amstrad Addict* and later *Atari Addict*. Did you enjoy that experience?
It's great to reminisce and also to write about the culture of gaming again: celebrity gamers, ST-using pop stars, etc. I'll be honest, the TV industry is pretty dead at the moment, so if anyone wants to hire me to spew out words, I may well bite your hand off. In recent years, I've been guest tutoring on the MA in creative business at the National Film & Television School. Last year I created materials for a new gaming industry module, including a 28-slide deck on the history of videogames. Many students think gaming began with consoles and major publishers in the late-Nineties, so it's important to document the early years and DIY developers. I hope promoting the gaming culture I grew up with (and love) might influence these potential games industry CEOs of the future. ✱

My PROUDEST MOMENT

"Whilst not retro or gamesy, *Do Not Resuscitate* was very much inspired by the DIY ethic I honed on *AA*. An NHS executive who oversaw a lot of London's COVID bed provision wanted to pilot his own animated hospital sitcom. An animation company quoted him £100k for one minute. A mutual friend sent him my way. I delivered him four minutes for £20k all in, including an Oscar-winning composer, *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars* stars, plus Mark Heap (*Spaced*, *Friday Night Dinner*) who travelled down from the Lake District for a 20-minute voice record. I'd worked with Mark in 1995 and we'd often go to gaming arcades on Tottenham Court Road after filming. Somehow my sparsely budgeted CG short won 2024 Best World Animation at AniMate Online, a six-month-long global online festival and public vote. I was so chuffed. You can check it out at watchdnr.com. I have pitches for both a TV series and videogame version if anybody's interested."


AN IDEA HAT PRODUCTION
DO NOT RESUSCITATE
GET A DOSE OF IT NOW AT VIMEO.COM/IDEAHAT/DNR
MANDIP GILL KYLE SOLLER MARK HEAP
SIMON GREENALL LU CORFIELD

> "The magazine became a de facto manifesto, a secret society of Rod, Adam and AA readers"
> ADAM PETERS

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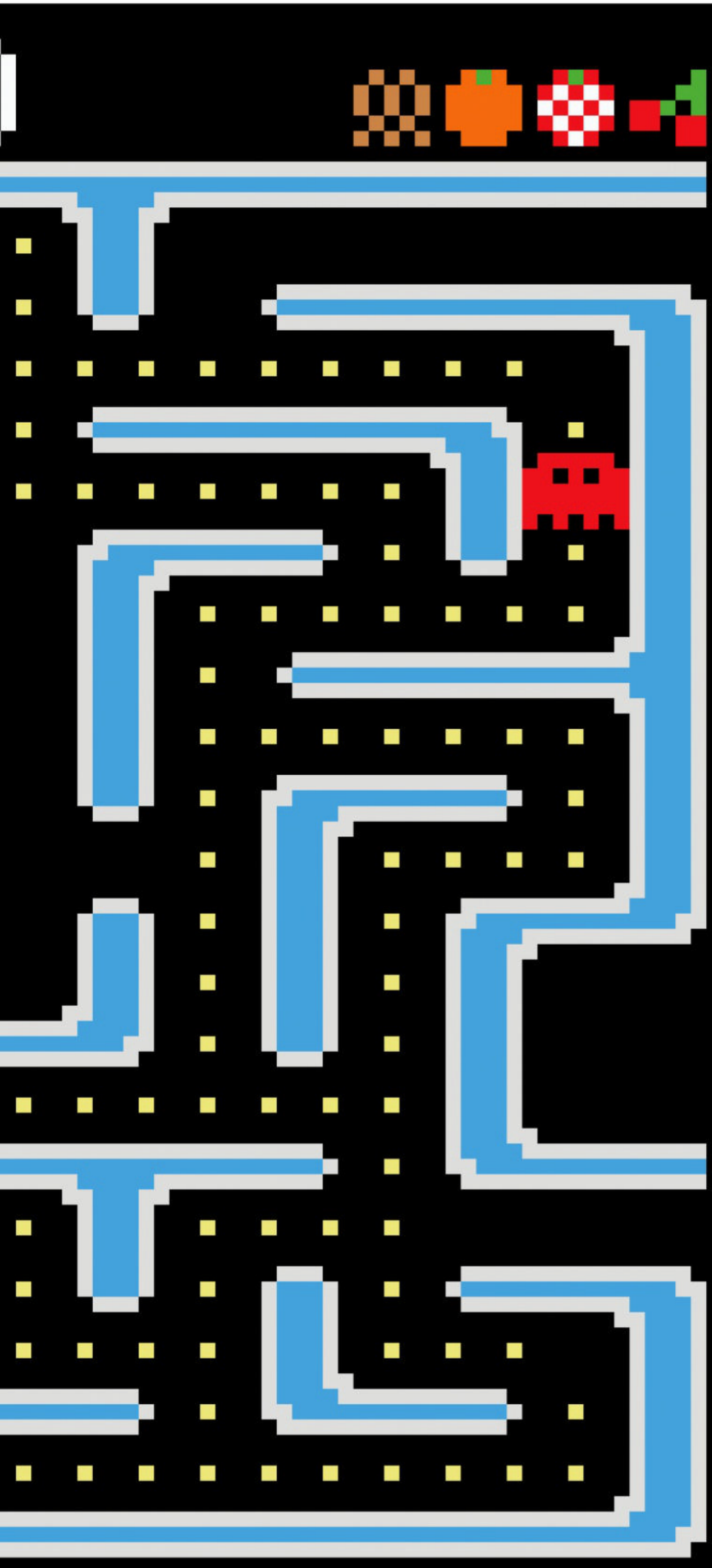


Ms Pac-Man

GOBBLING ON THE GO!

» RETROREVIVAL

» ATARI LYNX » 1990 » ATARI

I'm a person that lives on ritual and when I used to work at the Gateway in Kinson, my Friday would always consist of the same routine. I'd pick up my £65 wage from the cash office, get some chips for lunch (playing a game of *Rastan* while I waited) and then cycle to Columbia Computers and ask them the same weekly question, "Have any new Lynx games come in this week?"

Nine times out of ten the answer was always no, but occasionally there would be new stock in and I'd hungrily devour the meagre selection and work out if I could really afford to waste £20 on a game that week. I'd almost always break, safe in the knowledge that if I couldn't go out with my mates, I'd at least have a new game to play.

However, the problem with the Lynx was that while it had a lot of good games, they weren't exactly time sinks. Many of its games were arcade conversions meaning releases like *Ms Pac-Man* really needed to justify their outlay. Fortunately, I love the game, and while the Lynx conversion isn't perfect, it still managed to hold my attention for quite a few weeks.

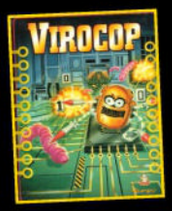
Unlike *Rampage*, which featured an extra character, there's nothing new or exclusive in the Lynx version of *Ms Pac-Man*. While it suffers from a slightly squished screen – why the Lynx's vertical mode wasn't used is a mystery – all four stages are accurately represented and it runs at a decent speed as well. I've always preferred *Ms Pac-Man* to the original game, so being able to take it wherever I went easily justified the high price point.

I guess even then, buying *Ms Pac-Man* highlighted my love of retro games. After all, it was eight years old by the time it debuted on Atari's system and looked positively ancient next to some of the Amiga games my mates were playing. I didn't care though, I had an impressive-looking arcade conversion of a hit arcade game that fit (incredibly snugly) in my inside coat pocket. What wasn't there to love? ✱

THE MAKING OF VIROCOP

EVERY SYSTEM HAS ITS HIDDEN GEMS, AND THE COMMODORE AMIGA IS NO EXCEPTION. RELEASED IN 1993, THIS TALE OF A ROBOTIC VIRUS KILLER RECEIVED DECENT CRITICAL ACCLAIM, YET IS ONE OF THE SYSTEM'S LESSER-KNOWN GAMES. RETRO GAMER CHATS TO THREE GRAFTGOLD ALUMS TO FIND OUT MORE

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** RENEGADE/ TIME WARNER
- **DEVELOPER:** GRAFTGOLD
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA
- **RELEASED:** 1995
- **GENRE:** RUN-AND-GUN

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

AVALON (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM
RELEASED: 1984

URIDIUM
PLATFORM: COMMODORE 64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1986

FIRE & ICE
PLATFORM: AMIGA, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1992

Retro Gamer loves a good acronym, and they don't come much better than the protagonist of Graftgold's *Virocop*, released 31 years ago. Rotund, yellow and cute, yet well-armed and deadly, DAVE – Digital Armoured Virus Exterminator – is the very best of the Virocop division, for when things get *really* nasty.

DAVE works on the GameDisk, a virtual theme park consisting of four distinct game zones. There's a sports zone, an urban zone, a military area and Silicon Valley. But there's a problem. As anyone who's seen *Westworld* or *Jurassic Park* will know, these things *always* go wrong. In this case, it's a noxious virus, doing its best to infect every segment of the GameDisk, corrupting the experience for clients and causing the company's stock to crash cataclysmically. It's left with no choice but to send in DAVE.

In the early Nineties, following its successes of the previous decade, Essex-based developer Graftgold expanded, adding more staff and moving to larger premises as it focussed on the 16-bit computers and consoles. Two of its recruits were a pair of friends from Harwich, Essex: artist John Kershaw and programmer Iain Wallington. "I didn't know how to get into [the videogames] industry, despite doing a college course on general programming," remembers Iain. "John and I were school friends, we got together and started to make some demos at home. Then, we spotted an advert in the local paper for games programmers and artists."

Neither Iain nor John had any idea who Graftgold was – its name was rarely seen on packaging, with the publisher names prominent instead. "But when we turned up at its office, there were all these Golden Joystick Awards and posters on the wall. Then Steve [Turner] and Andrew [Braybrook] walked in, and we realised who these people were!" After chatting about a mutual love of music for most of their interview, the pair were duly hired

» [Amiga] Shades of Codemasters' classic *Micro Machines* at the start of *Virocop*.

» [Amiga] Bosses release copious Power Balls, which DAVE can spend on weapons.

» Iain Wallington, flanked by Andrew Braybrook (left) and Steve Turner. Today, Iain still works in the industry for David Braben's Frontier Developments.

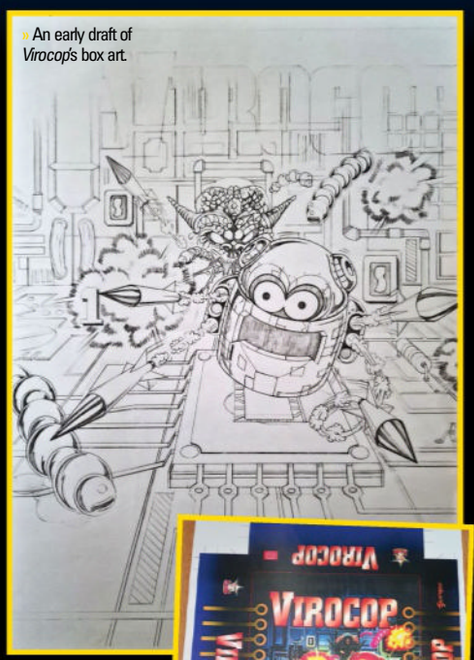
and put to work providing assets and code for existing projects at Graftgold, including constructing tracks for *Super Off Road*, Graftgold's Master System port of *Ivan 'Ironman' Stewart's Super Off Road*.

One of its other development projects was *Tanky 2*, an idea devised by audio technician Jason Page. Thanks to the excellent website Games That Weren't, screenshots of this demo surfaced in 2020. "Jason didn't have time to develop it further," explains Iain, "so Steve gave it to me and said he wanted to move development across to the Amiga." Iain got to work, first with John, then fellow artists Colin Seaman and Steve Wilkins. Meanwhile, with Jason shortly leaving Graftgold, the game's music and audio were handed over to Lee Banyard. But *Tanky 2* was designed for the Sega Mega Drive, so the team brainstormed how to morph it into a more realistic project for the Commodore 16-bit computer. Iain grins when we ask about the original *Tanky*. "That was Jason's humour. There was no *Tanky*. Only *Tanky 2*. I had started to add some enemies and basic weapons, but that was about it before we changed direction."

While not directly involved in *Tanky 2* or its subsequent iterations, Graftgold boss Steve Turner kept a close eye on development, lending his experience whenever required. "Because [the player] was a tank, they had the turret to consider as well, and this made it a lot of graphics just for the main character, which all had to be stored in the Amiga," he recalls. "Then, when we took the demo to Renegade [Graftgold's publishing partner in the early/mid-Nineties], it was lukewarm on the idea. It wasn't until much later that I saw they were working on a very similar game, top-down with little tanks driving around." Whether it was just a coincidence, fuelled by the success of similar games, was moot – in its current form, Renegade wasn't interested in *Tanky 2*.

Graftgold went back to the drawing board. "I suggested a robot like KLP-2," continues Steve, "with a pointed base so you didn't have to do all the frames of animation – he could just go up and down slopes and remain ▶

"THAT WAS JASON'S HUMOUR. THERE WAS NO TANKY. ONLY TANKY 2"
IAIN WALLINGTON



» An early draft of *Virocop*'s box art.

» A sample of the *Virocop* box.

WEAPON MASTER

RETRO GAMER LOOKS AT THE WEAPONS AVAILABLE TO DAVE

SINGLE SHELL

■ DAVE's rapid-fire default weapon has infinite ammo and is good enough to eliminate most enemies, eventually. The AGA version includes flying spent shells. Fast and fired at waist height.

MORTAR

■ A bomb-like weapon that does more damage than the Single Shell, but is much slower. It also fires in an arc and has a limited range. One of the three starting weapons. It's not a lot of use.

MINES

■ DAVE can pepper his surroundings with these deadly mines, and enemies are rarely careful enough to avoid them. The mass of opponents neuters their usefulness, however.

3-WAY SHELL

■ Each shot is spaced at 22.5 degrees apart, and DAVE has an infinite supply. Otherwise, the 3-way Shell is similar to the Single Shell, only there are three of them. Obviously.

SMALL FLAMETHROWER

■ Should DAVE purchase this weapon, a wispy swathe of fire emanates from his midriff, sweeping opponents aside – should they be close enough. It has an endless supply, too.

PLASMA SURROUND

■ This unlimited Plasma upgrade, as its name suggests, surrounds DAVE, providing him with even better protection from the numerous infected enemies, plus a limited offensive capability.

HOMER

■ These powerful missiles seek out the nearest enemy, remorselessly hunting them down before detonating. Despite the need to aim, unfortunately, they're very slow. D'oh!

TWIN HOMER

■ Not one, but two Homer missiles, each one guaranteed to eliminate even the sturdiest of enemies. Sadly, like its singular colleague, it's slow and limited in ammunition.

MISSILE SPREAD

■ A wide range of missiles that zoom across the screen, taking out multiple enemies at once. Useful in a jam, but limited in ammunition. So not that useful.

TWIN MISSILE

■ DAVE's double missile weapon is slow but powerful. He also possesses a limited supply, so it's best used in conjunction with the 3-way Shell or flamethrower.

PLASMA

■ These glowing rings eliminate nearby enemies and also protect DAVE from incoming damage. With many levels ridiculously busy, it's good for clearing a path.

LARGE FLAMETHROWER

■ When you absolutely have to fry every last virus, we heartily recommend the large flamethrower. It's also handy at barbecues and has infinite fuel.

TWIN BOLT LASER

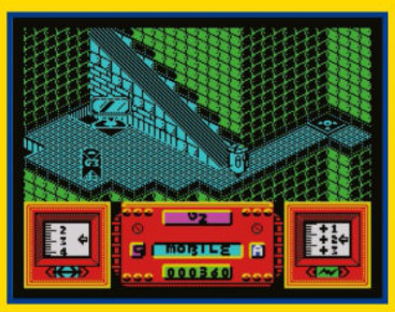
■ A destructive laser that eats through enemies, continuing until spent. Available in this and a singular, less powerful version. It offers unlimited shots and fun.

» [Amiga] Mind your step, DAVE!

ROBOT RUMPUS

RETRO GAMER LOOKS AT GRAFTGOLD'S OBSESSION WITH OUR METALLIC FRIENDS

From its earliest days, Graftgold has produced several key games starring our robotic friends. First, there was *Paradroid*, Andrew Braybrook's masterful tale of rogue robots and the Influence Device, beamed on board to grapple and destroy them, grabbing any useful parts in the process. Meanwhile, Steve Turner took *Paradroid*'s themes and gameplay for his Spectrum spiritual successor, *Quazatron*, transplanting the metallic action from spaceships to a series of pyramidal fortresses. A sequel, *Magnetron* (below), appeared two years later, and both these games feature the loveable KLP-2, a direct influence on *Virocop*'s DAVE. Meanwhile, the Influence Device continued to appear, in a faster, competition-style edition called *Heavy Metal Paradroid* (with upgraded graphics), and on the Amiga and Atari ST as *Paradroid 90* and as *Paradroid 2000* for the Acorn Archimedes. Finally, of course, we have DAVE, the slightly rotund but determined hero of *Virocop*, the culmination of all of these characters.



▶ vertical." The idea stuck, inspiring the misconception today that *Virocop* is the third game (spiritual or not) in the *Quazatron*/*Magnetron* series. "It made a lot of sense, as the robot's basically driving on a gyroscope, and it solved so many problems," notes Iain. "Colin and I came up with some concepts from there, with R2-D2 obviously in our discussions. I mean, it wasn't KLP-2, but to me, I was very pleased to work on a game like *Quazatron*."

Other ideas – such as DAVE growing in size throughout the game – were abandoned, while some morphed into existing concepts, such as the proposed 'gods' theme, eventually becoming the war level, complete with hundreds of tiny soldiers, tanks and warships. "We came up with the idea of the different game genres," continues Iain, "and it was Andrew [Braybrook] who turned up one day having written a whole backstory about DAVE in a virtual environment with viruses to destroy. We'd had a few ideas up until that point, but this was great as we wanted to get a lot of diversity into the levels." Now known as *Virus Alert*, the four areas of GameDisk have been infected by green virus blobs that spread through each level, causing chaos and power outages. Across each location, DAVE searches for and destroys the viruses while fending off an assault from the infected denizens. At the end of each section, DAVE faces off against a boss, and these are as varied as the levels themselves, from a *Speedball*-esque skit with frozen blocks of cheerleaders to a giant King Kong ape, terrorising poor DAVE on a city rooftop.

» [Amiga] DAVE rescues the princess from the dreaded Kong.

> "I'M NOT A NATURAL WRITER, SO KEEPING A DIARY WASN'T EXACTLY SOMETHING I WANTED TO DO"
> **IAIN WALLINGTON**

Like some of Graftgold's earlier games, *Virocop*'s progress was documented in the press, with German magazine *Amiga Games* asking Andrew Braybrook to write an ongoing account of the development of its latest game. Having scratched that particular itch (with his *Paradroid* and *Morpheus* development diaries in *Zzap!64*), Andrew passed the baton to Iain. "I'm not a natural writer, so keeping a diary wasn't exactly something I wanted to do," he admits. "I tried to get into the habit of noting down what I'd done at the end of the day, writing it up and sending it across. Luckily, I didn't have to write it in German!" On page 69 of the October issue of *Amiga Games*, under the date 2 June 1993, came this terse statement from Iain, "*Tanky* ist tot!" – *Tanky* is dead. Also gone

» [Amiga] Taking fire on the Silicon Valley level.

» [Amiga] Like his predecessor, KLP-2, DAVE is full of personality.

» [Amiga] Frozen cheerleaders watch on in Level One's *Speedball* homage.

was the bird's-eye view of *Tanky*, replaced by a semi-isometric view. "Graftgold was quite close with the Bitmap Brothers," notes Iain, "and we often saw early demos of their stuff. I just loved the look of the *Chaos Engine*, so that was a big inspiration with the look, especially the military level."

Virus Alert's levels became flat, in essence, despite the view. "We went with this forced perspective view," explains Iain. "The maps themselves are completely 2D, so we had to translate our collisions from within a 2D to a semi-3D world, especially when DAVE drops down from a ledge to the level below. I also wanted DAVE to be able to jump off a ramp to give the game a dynamic feel. But we had a lot of issues trying to get it working." Over to Steve Turner to explain the problem Iain was facing. "Basically, Iain had a code map underneath the screen, so when they built the graphics in the map, it also produced a data file. Each 16x16 square contained data on the slope's height, direction, passability and so on. And the problem we had was essentially a 3D map in 2D, which created ambiguity, especially when the character was falling, because you had to decide when he stopped. And he also had a little shadow, which helped the player judge whether they were in the air, but this had to be calculated so it was always on the ground. There were a lot of rules, and basically, they kept going wrong."

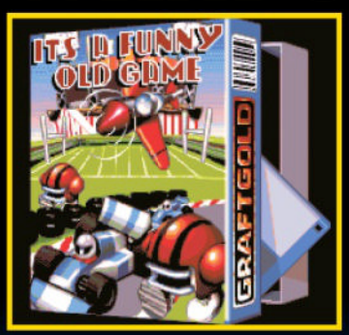
In Graftgold's previous game, *Super Off Road*, a separate top-down map was implemented to reduce the uncertainty. "[That] was discussed, but we decided it was too late to implement," explains Steve. One solution was to use the shadow's position to determine the floor height rather than the droid's base. This shadow position naturally changed depending on the floor, tracking down a vertical wall if DAVE went over a ledge. His position was then used to decide when to stop falling, IE, when it caught up with the lower shadow position. "Splitting the process into the two parts simplified all the rules, especially when the droid travelled diagonally across cells," says Steve.

Working on PCs connected to the Amiga via SNASM [a popular cross-assembler for the PC and Amiga], Iain and his art colleagues brought life to *Virocop*'s distinct ▶

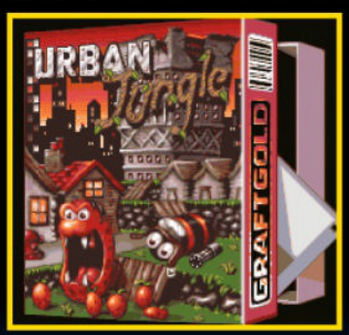
» Jason Page, Iain and Colin pose for the latest *Tanky/Virocop* developer diary.

WHAT'S IN A GAME?

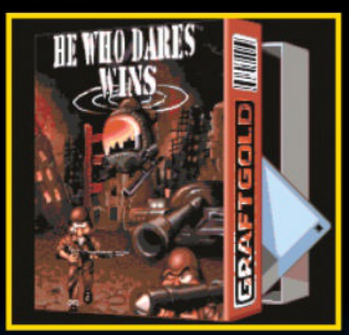
THE FICTIONAL MOCK-UP GAMES OF VIROCOP'S FOUR DIVERSE LEVELS.



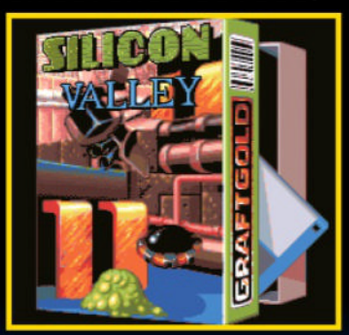
■ Level One: It's A Funny Old Game



■ Level Two: Urban Jungle



■ Level Three: He Who Dares Wins



■ Level Four: Silicon Valley

» [Amiga] To beat this ape monster, DAVE must first float up on the floor grills and shoot at the statues left and right.

» [Amiga] *Virocop*'s multiple planes and perspectives caused issues throughout development.

» [Amiga] Another homage, this time to Graftgold's earlier game, *Super Off Road*.

» [Amiga] Exploring the Urban Jungle.

levels and character to its metallic hero. "Steve wanted to get personality into DAVE," says Iain. "So when, for example, you fall off a ledge, his head detaches slightly. I did that one morning with Steve – my math at the time was fairly rudimentary, but he was a great source of knowledge, you could ask him anything about math." Meanwhile, each level is full of fun decorations and wall art, including posters of Graftgold's earlier *Fire & Ice* and its star, Cool Coyote. For eagle-eyed gamers, there's even a nod to Iain's band back in Colchester, Rocking The Pig, with a porcine guitarist banging out a riff, based on a poster created by Iain's wife. "I'd taken it to work to get it photocopied [no judgement, we all did it back then! – Ed] and the next thing I knew, Colin had recreated it in-game! He did some really wacky stuff. We've even got Murray Walker in the grandstands, as I love Formula One, and he was a bit of a hero. Colin would just turn up and show me these amazing little bits of art."

As 1995 dawned, it became clear to Steve Turner that the Amiga wasn't quite at its best, at least commercially. Graftgold's publishing partner, Renegade (now owned by Time Warner), seemed enthusiastic, at least. However, it insisted

BRAYBROOK ON VIROCOP

THE FAMOUS COMMODORE CODER GIVES RETRO GAMER HIS THOUGHTS ON GRAFTGOLD'S VIROCOP

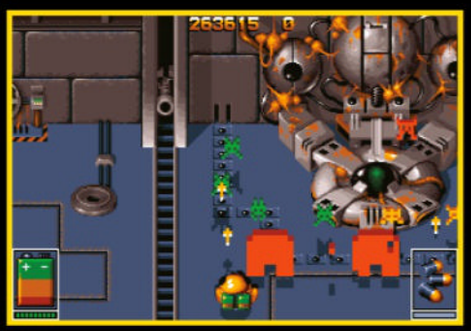
"When Iain started writing this game in 1993, we knew that the Amiga`s days were numbered. I got involved in designing the algorithms for the viruses, one of the 'resident' common elements across all levels, which needed to get tougher as the game progressed. There are also end-of-level bosses, something I've always avoided, as they take time to develop. I choreographed the Kong boss, which I believe Colin created. He was a fast artist and full of ideas. We would try out things, and he'd come back shortly with something new. He was easy to work with and always exceeded my expectations.

"I was impressed by the variety across the levels. The sports level features a car racetrack that leads seamlessly into a snooker table. While I was sitting in the same room as Iain for much of the development, we both had our own things to do, so I didn't notice many of the developments.

"*Virocop* ran to three floppy disks. Then came the A1200 AGA version with 64-colour graphics. Was there a plan to outdo my two-disk games? I do remember there was a last-minute priority one crash on one of the last levels. That's the 'fun' of assembler: when it goes down, it takes everything. It took three days to identify that one, an incorrect sound effect call. We got there eventually, and it was Graftgold's last game for the Amiga, and our last for Renegade. By the time of *Virocop*'s release, Commodore had gone. A sad end to the Amiga, but a nice way to bow out of the Amiga scene."

» [Amiga] This is the final big virus boss from the original Amiga game.

» [Amiga] DANGER AHEAD!



» [Amiga] A *Space Invaders* homage during the final boss encounter.

» [Amiga] A virus cackles away, bottom left, as DAVE flees from enemies.

on one final name change, concluding that it sounded more like an anti-virus utility than a game. "I thought Renegade were right – I wanted a catchier name, but could not come up with one that Iain and Colin liked," remembers Steve. "I probably suggested things like Virotron." The compromise seemed to satisfy everyone enough to become its eventual title, and *Virocop* received a good critical reception in the summer of 1995. "It was a good game to review," says Steve, "because it was very colourful and looked good in the magazines – having that initial kind of splash and excitement helped."

The majority of scores came in around the high Eighties, despite reservations over its difficulty. "Looking back now, I'd agree," says Iain, "but at the time I didn't, as I was so close to the game, working on it eight hours a day, five days a week for close to 18 months. Some bits are a bit buggy, mainly getting on and off platforms, and I know there's been justifiable criticism about that. I think I'd played and loved a lot of 2D platform games, and I just wanted to do that in 3D. It didn't quite work well enough." To be fair to Iain, gaming has changed significantly over the last 30 years. Gameplay concepts, such as expecting the player to fail, learn and retry, are not as acceptable today. The best example here is *Virocop*'s weaponry, purchased between levels at a circuit-style shop. The player has no idea what type of enemy awaits them the first time they play, and is left alone to select three potentially useless weapons. "Don't forget also, we were making arcade games on home machines – and those were punishing because they wanted your money," says Iain.

With an expanded AGA version also released – it includes an extra *Crusader*-type level, plus some sweet graphical trimmings such as the shell casings swirling out from DAVE – the extended development meant *Virocop* missed its planned optimal release point, becoming Graftgold's final Amiga game, having abandoned an Amiga version of *International Moto X*. "We all wanted to move on to the PlayStation and Nintendo 64," says Iain.

> "IT WAS A GOOD GAME TO REVIEW BECAUSE IT WAS VERY COLOURFUL AND LOOKED GOOD IN THE MAGAZINES"
> **STEVE TURNER**

Press enthusiasm aside, *Virocop* failed to make much of an impression commercially. "It's a shame," concludes Steve, "I playtested some parts, and it was the kind of simpler game that I enjoyed playing. I thought they did the big bosses really well, with Colin coming up with some great ideas. It always shocked me the way the commercial side of the Amiga died so rapidly." Nevertheless, for the young programmer from Harwich, Graftgold's learning environment proved invaluable. "It was great to go there and learn from two of the best people around [in the industry]," he smiles. "They had all these tried and tested systems – it was just fantastic, and I couldn't have asked for a better start to a career that's still going nearly 35 years later." ★

Our thanks to Iain, Steve and Andrew.

NOT-SO-USEFUL LEVEL CODES

Virocop utilises a level passcode system, but it's not quite as useful as it first appears. Each code (given at the end of a level) ties in to the player's name – typed in at the game's start – and their disk. Contemporary magazines happily printed their codes, unaware they'd be useless without the game disk and the name of the person who had completed the game.

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Final Fight

» **PLATFORM:** ARCADE » **RELEASED:** 1989 » **DEVELOPER:** CAPCOM

You've been battling your way through the first stage of Capcom's new brawler and you're finding it rather exhausting. Not because it's boring to play – far from it – but because it requires a lot more from you than simply mashing a button and hitting your opponents. You've quickly discovered that *Final Fight* is a game about crowd management as much as it is hitting goons, and with the ruffians of Mad Gear coming at you hard and fast you need to use every ounce of skill to not only take them down, but work out where to send them flying so they'll take out their buddies.

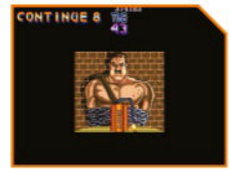
This intensity and crowd management continues as you start the second stage, where you catch a subway train to a showdown with Sodom, a huge Samurai wielding two katanas. It's an intense, gruelling battle, so when the fight concludes with a bonus stage that lets you smash the hell out of a fancy car, you gleefully relish the opportunity. As satisfying as pummelling a car to pieces is, the real highlight is when you finish and the car's owner wails over the amount of damage you've caused to his precious vehicle. That'll teach him for not having insurance.

BIO

Capcom's *Final Fight* arrived in arcades in 1989 and quickly stole the scrolling fighter crown away from *Double Dragon*. With a choice of three varied characters, spectacular visuals and a great array of weaponry, it soon led to a slew of similar games, both from Capcom and others. Its success in the arcades led to solid SNES conversions, as well as two SNES-exclusive sequels. Just pretend that *Final Fight: Streetwise* doesn't exist. We try to.

MORE CLASSIC FINAL FIGHT MOMENTS

Time's Up!



Final Fight's continue screen is superb. You're tied up in front of several sticks of dynamite that are due to explode. As the fuse burns down the actions of your hero get ever more frantic, until the screen eventually fades to white.

Pipe Dreams

There's a large choice of weapons to get your hands on in *Final Fight*, but the pipe remains our favourite to use. It may be slow, but the huge amount of damage it inflicts always brings a smile to our face.

Scrapping Together

While Capcom's game is perfectly fun on your own, it's even more enjoyable with a buddy. You can easily manage an area of the stage, or chuck an adversary across for your mate to finish off.

We All Fall Down

Dying is never fun in a game, but there's a neat gimmick in *Final Fight*. When you spawn back in, every single enemy is knocked to the ground. It not only gives you a temporary reprieve, but it looks cool as hell.

ENCORE! THE MUSICAL MAGIC OF THE AMIGA

THE GRAPHICS OF AMIGA 500 GAMES FAR SURPASSED ITS EIGHT-BIT PREDECESSORS. IT WASN'T SIMPLY THE LOOK OF THE GAMES THAT MADE THEM SO POPULAR. JUST AS STAR WARS WAS ELEVATED BY JOHN WILLIAMS' STIRRING SCORE, AMIGA GAMES WERE BROUGHT FULLY TO LIFE BY THEIR MUSIC

WORDS BY MARK SANDERSON

Forget the great graphics for a moment, once a game had been clicked into the Amiga's disk drive, music is what gamers were first greeted with. While some of that music was composed by established industry names – the late Richard Joseph was well on his way to turning 40 when he composed for feted Bitmap Brothers games such as the *Chaos Engine* – a great deal of Amiga game music was honed and produced by teenagers from their bedrooms.

These were people who didn't have the faintest idea about business acumen, let alone how to operate in the adult world. Young, naïve and madly passionate about computers, they were responsible for creating a change in the perception of videogame music. As well as creating tunes that are still popular and much-loved today.

Barry Leitch is now a veteran composer of 40 years across a number of gaming platforms. He would go on to do the music for *Lotus Turbo Challenge 2* on the Amiga, among others. He describes that game creating era for the Amiga of the late-Eighties and early Nineties in very specific terms, "It was sex and drugs and rock and roll, just without the drugs – we couldn't afford those."

Barry grew up in Scotland loving computers. "In around 1982 I had a ZX81, but it was no good – it had no sound," he says. "I started going to a local computer club on Wednesday nights and began creating demos. If you wanted to meet like-minded people, these are the places you'd go."

> *"IT WAS SEX AND DRUGS AND ROCK AND ROLL, JUST WITHOUT THE DRUGS – WE COULDN'T AFFORD THOSE"*
> **BARRY LEITCH**

At this time, Barry had a break when a neighbour, who was a teacher, let him borrow a BBC computer over the summer holidays. "It was trial and error working out how to use it," he says. "The big hurdle was not having a music driver; I was trying all kinds of software." The arrival of the Amiga would change Barry's, and many other people's lives when it came to creating the sounds they had dreamed of.

Like many composers for the Amiga, Barry got experience early on. In 1986, aged only 16, one of his compositions was used on the Commodore 64 scrolling shoot-'em-up game *ICUPS*. "I got a £150 cheque through the post for that game, but no sooner than the envelope hit the doormat my Dad swiped it," he says. This is because Barry had racked up a £300 phone bill on his parent's land line making calls to find a buyer. Worse still, was the critical response to *ICUPS*. "*ZZap!64* absolutely panned it – I think it got 48%, it was brutal," he says.

In the late-Eighties there were seemingly no career opportunities for creating music for computer games. In fact, there seemed like there was no career path at all. Still, Barry was not put off. After leaving school, he worked on the production line at Roll Royce. "It was tedious beyond words," he says. "I'd be filing metal and always whistling a tune and one day the foreman comes over and says, your head is always full of music, you need to do something else." That stuck with Barry. Much to the bemusement of his parents he left Rolls Royce and continued creating music. As an active member of the gaming community, he began finding work. Better still, it was

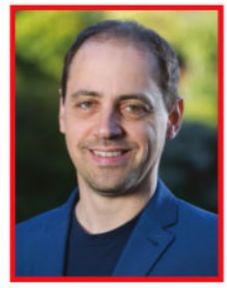
BARRY LEITCH

■ Responsible for Amiga music for games like *Lotus Turbo Challenge 2* and *Lethal Weapon*, Barry Leitch continues to produce kick-ass tunes for videogames as well as children's toys.

TIM WRIGHT

■ Also known as CoLD SToRAGE, Tim continues to compose and play live and did the music for *WipEout 2097*, which won the Best Sounding Game award at the 1997 Golden Joystick Awards.

ALLISTER BRIMBLE



■ Allister wrote the music for numerous Amiga games, often teaming up with Team17 for titles like *Alien Breed*. He continues to compose to keep it rocking for a number of different consoles.

» [Amiga] Ominous bass lines, eerie notes, and sparse percussion create a sense of dread and isolation in *Alien Breed*.

received well by the press. For Barry, the main strength of the Amiga was its sample playback for music and FX. "One no longer had to approximate a synthesised version of a scream or a gunshot," he says. "You could actually have a sample of the real thing."

Fellow composer Tim Wright, (aka CoLD SToRAGE) is very much on the same page when it comes to the Amiga's capabilities. Later responsible for the music on *Shadow Of The Beast II* and *Lemmings*, among many other things, Tim kicked off his game development career after managing to get a credit card with a high enough limit to buy his first Amiga 500.

"The Amiga 500 had four tracks of sampled audio, which was such a massive thing for me. A friend had recently parted with the best part of £2,000 for a keyboard sampler, but on seeing my Amiga he quickly took it back to the shop and also bought himself one."

At the time, Tim held a much sought-after job as a computer programmer for Littlewoods' Index catalogue. He had already caused what he describes as the freak-out of

» [Amiga] Tim Wright's playful arrangements of well-known classical and folk melodies gave *Lemmings* a quirky, humorous tone.

ENCORE! THE MUSICAL MAGIC OF THE AMIGA

KILLER TUNES

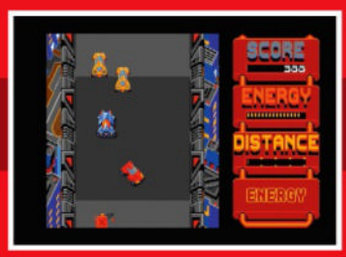
THE ESSENTIAL AMIGA SCORES YOU MUST HEAR

TURRICAN II: THE FINAL FIGHT

■ This Chris Huelsbeck composition has stood the test of time. By creating rich, layered compositions that sounded far beyond what most games of the era achieved on the Amiga, Huelsbeck pushed the Amiga's sound chip to its limits. Quite simply a total classic.

SHADOW OF THE BEAST

■ David Whittaker influenced a generation of composers with his work on games with the Commodore 64. On its release in 1989, game music was zany and upbeat. This was a very different animal, with more of a cinematic touch. A move from gaming tunes to a haunting soundscape.



LED STORM

■ Composer Tim Follin was known for pushing the Amiga to its limits to create great music. *LED Storm* in 1989 was no different, with lush and dreamy chord progressions. The title screen was the kind gamers would leave on just for the slick tunes and beats.

GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

■ Another Tim Follin classic and an absolute triumph of composition and layered sounds. Less computer game soundtrack and much more in keeping with an introduction title track of a primetime TV show of the time, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is an orchestral wonder.

SPEEDBALL 2: BRUTAL DELUXE

■ A steampunk riff groove from some dystopian future that perfectly encapsulates the game it scores. The music helped create an immersive experience that elevated the game. This effort was named winner of the 1990 Best Soundtrack Of The Year at the Golden Joystick Awards.

PINBALL FANTASIES

■ Composer Olof Gustafsson took everything that was great in its predecessor *Pinball Dreams* and turned it up to 11. More like a commercial piece of work than a traditional computer game, it's both polished and timeless and helped make something as simple as pinball into a classic game.

MUSIC MAESTROS

THE COMPOSERS WHO FUSED ARTISTRY, TECHNICAL MASTERY, AND HARDWARE-PUSHING INNOVATION

TIM FOLLIN

■ In some people's opinion, Tim Follin is the greatest ever composer for videogames. Across multiple consoles, Follin created beautifully rich soundscapes. Given the constraints he was working with he was able to create memorable and luscious harmonies. His music often outshone the games they featured on.

DAVID WHITTAKER

■ Something of an icon to many of the younger generation of composers coming through on the Amiga, mainly for his work on the Commodore 64, Whittaker had a big influence in moving gaming music towards a more progressive, cinematic and kick-ass style.

RICHARD JOSEPH

■ The late Richard Joseph worked closely with developers like The Bitmap Brothers, always ensuring the music was an integral part of the game's identity – not just an afterthought. He very much shaped the distinct sounds of several classic games, including the *Chaos Engine*.

©Jason Skelly bit.ly/joseph_credit

CHRIS HUELSBECK

■ Chris Huelsbeck's compositions for *Turrican* and *Turrican II* have continued to endure, with soaring melodies and strong hooks. His work has been brought to life by live orchestral performances, perfectly illustrating the impact Amiga composers had on the wider pop culture.

» [Amiga] The tight percussion and differing tracks gave each racing environment in *Lotus Turbo Challenge 2* its own unique atmosphere.

» [Amiga] *HeroQuest* captured the fantasy adventure's mood, creating an immersive, slightly melancholic but heroic feel that elevates the game.

all freak-outs among management by inventing an entirely new mainframe development system at Littlewoods – without being asked.

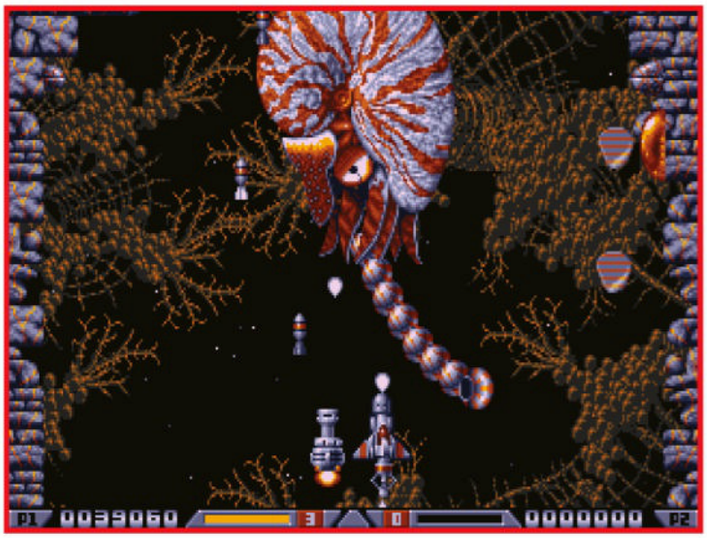
At Littlewoods, Tim drew a fair amount of further attention from his colleagues. No other employees were being picked up at lunchtime by a speeding Ferrari or Lotus, but for Tim this occasionally happened, as he was ferried off to the Psygnosis office to squeeze in a new brief or deliver fresh music for a game.

> *"I REMEMBER SEEING AN ADVERT – I THINK IT WAS IN EITHER AMIGA USER OR MICRO MART – IT WAS ASKING FOR DEMOS AND GRAPHICS. HAVING BEEN PLAYING AROUND WITH THAT I THOUGHT I HAD NOTHING TO LOSE"*
> **ALLISTER BRIMBLE**

Growing up around computers, Tim was always tinkering and producing demos. It was the music he created for the *Puggs In Space* Amiga demo, as part of the demogroup Dionysus, that first caught the attention of Psygnosis cofounder Ian Hetherington. "Ian asked me if I'd heard of *Shadow Of The Beast*, as they were looking to create a sequel and wanted me to create the soundtrack," says Tim. "So, I suddenly went from ground zero to following in the footsteps of David Whittaker."

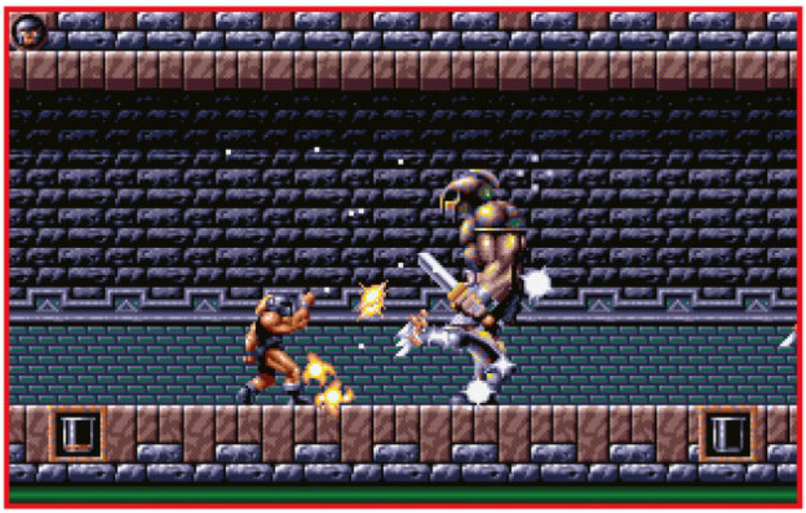
David Whittaker was a composer many looked up to for his work on the Commodore 64 and how he used quick and short notes of a chord in quick succession. Allister Brimble was no different. He'd done a load of demos as a teenager and was very much inspired by the 1986 Commodore 64 game *Glider Rider*. "I was really taken by David Whittaker's music for the game, I recorded it on my tape cassette recorder so I could listen to it note by note to try and work out what he was doing," he says.

Despite still being at sixth-form college, Allister quickly earned himself an opportunity on the Amiga circuit. "I remember seeing an advert – I think it was in either *Amiga User*



» [Amiga] This 1989 Bitmap Brothers shoot-'em-up features David Whittaker sample *Bomb The Bass*.

» [Amiga] *Magic Pockets* gained notoriety for featuring an instrumental, stripped-down version of Betty Boo's *Doin' the Do*.



» [Amiga] *Gods* used the Nation 12 track, *Into The Wonderful*, perfectly in this Bitmap Brothers platform classic.

» [Amiga] In *Project X*, Allister Brimble created two memorable intro tracks of *Rave Mode* and the chilled *Old Timer Mode*.

I step away from the counter for two seconds and some idiot's already ringing that stupid bell!
Walk to
Open Close Push Pull
Walk to Pick up Talk to Give
Use Look at Turn on Turn off
380 pieces of eight
hunk of meat
fish
map
minutes

» [Amiga] The classic point-and-click adventure game saw the music really enable the mood of the game to change.

or *Micro Mart* – it was asking for demos and graphics. Having been playing around with that I thought I had nothing to lose."

His first Amiga game was the Grandslam-produced effort *Thunderbirds*. He got £500 for that just from working on it at home in his bedroom. Like Barry Leitch and Tim Wright, Allister was taken by the Amiga's high-quality sample playback capabilities. "Previously those with a C64 could only play one poor quality sample at a time. Now we had four channels of eight-bit 29KHz audio," he says. Unlike Barry and Tim, Allister was still living with his parents and creating music from his bedroom in Devon.

Although seemingly living a charmed life, it still sometimes came with obstacles for Allister. "My biggest challenge was the game *Rock Star Ate My Hamster* for Codemasters. The music had to be interactive, which was almost unheard of at the time," he says. In the game, you managed a band which slowly improved as you progressed. "We split the music into many small segments and a parameter (band skill) would be set to randomly combine segments that went well with each other or clashed! I've not done anything similar even in the modern day."

For other composers, they had other challenges to deal with to maintain that composing career. Tim Wright was still leading a double life. Although settled in his career at Littlewoods, his superiors had created their own view on him due to aspirations in the gaming world. Views Tim came face to face with when he accidentally stumbled upon his line manager's appraisal notes. They read, "Wants to get rich quick by making computer games." He challenged his boss on this assessment, only to be asked whether he was wrong.

Before long, Psygnosis did come calling with a full-time offer. It matched Tim's requested salary, and he moved to what was, at the time, a fairly spartan early office – almost living there, composing during the day and often arriving early or leaving late after marathon sessions of *Doom* with fellow developers.

Barry Leitch also went full time, working for Imagitec and then later Ocean. These were very different days. For one thing, you could smoke at your desk. Barry recalls some marathon sessions at Imagitec, doing what

» [Amiga] *Assassin* has a big epic romp of an intro theme, with every note suggesting the title of the game itself.

» [Amiga] Team17's *Superfrog* remains a much-loved game by Amiga gamers, particularly due to Allister Brimble's music and sound effects.

» [Amiga] Cascading synths and a juggernaut of a baseline feature in the horizontally scrolling shoot-'em-up *Apidya*.

» [Amiga] Not just background noise, it was integral to *Utopia*'s unique atmosphere and addictive charm, making it popular with Amiga gamers.

Specification
Engine: 5498cc, 8 cylinders, 16 valves
Max. speed: 243mph
Max. power: 520bhp
Acceleration: 0-60 in 3.8secs.
Special Features: Front/Rear missiles, 'Super' missile, Homing vehicle, Mines, Battering ram, Nitro boost, Armour-plated bodyshell

» [Amiga] *Supercars 2* was another Barry Leitch racing effort that matched the pace of the game it scored.

» [Amiga] Composer Olof Gustafsson created diverse, atmospheric tracks that perfectly matched each table's theme in *Pinball Dreams*.

he calls "banging out tunes". With the team armed with enough caffeine tablets to raise a dead horse, they sometimes went days without sleep to create music.

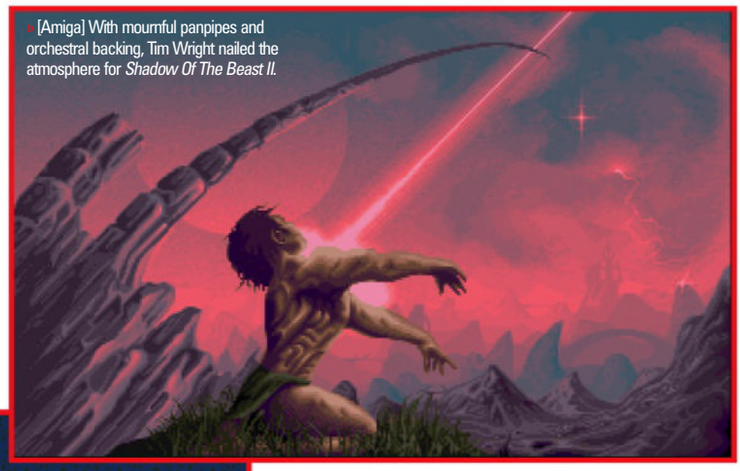
While the work environment could be unconventional, and certainly not anything resembling corporate, it could be particularly relaxed when it came to the rules so closely followed today. During those halcyon Amiga days of the late-Eighties and early Nineties Allister Brimble used whatever software was available at the time. SoundMon was one programme he was using regularly in his work. "One day I got a letter from the guy who designed it," he says. "I offered him £100 for services rendered and he was happy with that. That's how it was back then."

For the most part, life was straightforward in Allister's world. The only difficulty he had was the occasional train trip to the Midlands for face-to-face meetings with game developers. For all the technology, news – good or bad – would reach composers in the mail. Allister still recalls the dread on receiving the news from Codemasters that it didn't like his efforts for what would be the 1989 racing stuntman game *Nitro Boost Challenge*. "I was so upset at the time and so disappointed in myself. It was my mum who got me to see that I'd written music about a stuntman, instead of a guy doing stunts." In the end, Allister went back and got the job done. He would go on to create many memorable compositions, including the 1991 hit *Alien Breed*, but that letter highlighted the isolation of the young freelance composers.

As ground-breaking as the Amiga was, there were still limits to what it could do. As Barry Leitch recalls, "I think the most difficult experience creating music on the Amiga was for projects where we had very little memory. You have to remember we're talking about 30KB here for the likes of *Hero Quest* or *Space Crusade* in-game music. That is an insanely small footprint for music data and instrument samples. One second of CD-quality audio takes 172KB. Think about that – we're talking minuscule amounts of data to create music that plays music for several minutes."

You only have to scroll through the camera roll of your smartphone to see most of the snaps you have on there hold far more data than the entire storage capacity of an Amiga.

» [Amiga] While so much Amiga music moved away from cute sounding, this was cute, but still great.



» [Amiga] With mournful panpipes and orchestral backing, Tim Wright nailed the atmosphere for *Shadow Of The Beast II*.

» [Amiga] A playful and catchy reggae effort for the intro music of this game based on war.

Essentially, music composers for the machine were the equivalent of watch makers – creating precision and beauty in very tight spaces. Composers of the time still have a real sense of pride in their work, as Tim Wright explains, "I know maybe the gameplay on *SOTBII* isn't exactly up there, but I thought what we did with it was something to be proud of. It was a great time, but it went in the blink of an eye. It was still a kind of cottage industry, but then PlayStation changed everything."

> *"I THINK THE MOST DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE CREATING MUSIC ON THE AMIGA WAS FOR PROJECTS WHERE WE HAD VERY LITTLE MEMORY"*
> **BARRY LEITCH**

Tim recalls the change of the guard around the mid-Nineties. "We'd get sent to all these journalist and PR events – they'd ply you with alcohol, because the more relaxed you were, the idea was they'd get a better story, I guess," says Tim.

They guessed right. As far as Tim was concerned, it was already known internally that Leftfield, the Chemical Brothers and Orbital would feature on the *WipEout* soundtrack – but he let the cat out of the bag. A few days later, the marketing manager confronted him, shaking a piece of quoted copy in his face. "He went absolutely mad, barking that I'd spilled the beans too soon. I had to go and have a teary moment in the bathroom to compose myself – I didn't want people to see me upset."

An apology followed later, but the atmosphere had shifted. Vast amounts of money were now on the table, and PR training loomed for everyone involved in making games. That was very much a case of the Rubicon having been crossed. While huge advancements had been made, that rock and roll gunslinger element of the role had grown up and left the building. In many ways, it was the creative efforts of composers that led the industry to that more serious and commercial place. The great Amiga era may have passed, but for those who played the Amiga games circa 1987 to 1993, the memories of the great music remain strongly intact.

AWARD WINNERS

AMIGA COMPOSERS CAUGHT THE EAR WHEN IT CAME TO MUSIC

The Golden Joystick Awards is now in its 43rd year, making it the world's longest-running public-voted games awards, with a star-studded ceremony held in London. The Amiga quickly dominated the category of best soundtrack, with *International Karate*, *Future Wars*, *Speedball 2* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island* all getting the gong between 1988 and 1991.

The music for *International Karate* was created for the Commodore 64 by the hugely influential Rob Hubbard, with David Lowe adapting it for the Amiga. *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* was a big hit on the Amiga for the Bitmap Brothers. Yes, it was insanely playable, but it was brought to life hugely by the music and sounds of the game. Anyone who has ever played it will instantly remember the cries of the vendor in the stands of "ice cream, ice cream".

Reviewing the game, Steve Merrett gave it 95% in the February 1991 issue of *CU Amiga*, giving special praise by saying one of the most impressive features of *Speedball 2* is the sound. The title track was written by Nation 12 before being coded by the late Richard Joseph, who was also responsible for the sound effects. The collaboration would provide further fruit with the platform game *Gods*.

Alien Breed: Tower Assault

RUNNING AND GUNNING

» PC » 1994 » EAST POINT SOFTWARE

Thirty-five years is a long time in the games industry and it's a testament to Team17's resilience and games that the publisher is still around today. While it's easy to place the Wakefield-based studio's success on a certain franchise starring warring, wriggly combatants, I think that's doing Team17 something of a disservice.

The studio has always had a good eye for zoning in on popular elements of the zeitgeist, whether it's aping acclaimed arcade games or borrowing inspiration from hit movies. Yes, you can make the argument that the vast majority of its Amiga output wasn't always original, but it was hard to argue with the low price points of its games, the slickness of their presentation and aesthetics and the fact that a lot of them were bloody good fun.

Worms rightly gets all the focus nowadays, but my favourite Team17 series has always been *Alien Breed*. The original Amiga classic may have been quickly overshadowed by its *Special Edition*, but all that really proved was that gamers were hungry for *Alien Breed*'s winning formula which married the huge mazes of *Gauntlet* to the thrills and hi-octane action of James Cameron's *Aliens* movie.

Tower Assault, which debuted in 1994, is my favourite of the lot, delivering exceptionally tense shootouts as you battle your way through each giant map. Peppered with multiple exits (providing you play the disc version) and awash with gory imagery, it's a fast-paced, thrilling shooter that really comes alive when playing with a friend.

Yes, it's still quite easy to get lost within the huge areas and yes it's brutally tough thanks to respawning aliens, limited ammo, and a supremely challenging opening level, but it does a good job of building on the mechanics of the original game and making you feel like an overpowered supersoldier as you spray bullets everywhere and paint the corridors with alien blood.

The series took an ambitious turn the following year with the interesting, if flawed, *Alien 3D* and while the series returned in 2009, it never quite grabbed me like *Tower Assault* did. Now all I need to do is work out how to get this GOG version running on my Steam Deck.

PRESERVED
GOOD OLD GAME
BY GOG

20%
OFF YOUR FIRST GOG PURCHASE USING CODE
RETROGOG20
(ONE-TIME USE)

THE MAKING OF Romancing SaGa

FRESH OFF A COUPLE OF GAME BOY HITS, GAME DESIGNER AKITOSHI KAWAZU BROUGHT HIS SIGNATURE RPG STYLE TO THE SUPER FAMICOM WITH THE RELEASE OF ROMANCING SAGA, THE CONSOLE DEBUT FOR ONE OF SQUARE ENIX'S LONGEST-RUNNING SERIES

Words By Aidan Moher

At their heart, good stories are about people and their problems. "In fantasy stories, small episodes all come together to paint a grand vision of what the world is," long-time Square Enix game designer Akitoshi Kawazu said when we asked him what fans can expect from his latest game, *Romancing SaGa -Minstrel Song- Remastered International*. "Characters meet; bid farewell; are surprised; feel sorrow, joy and anger; have new discoveries; and create things together. All of these experiences form a tale that is all your own, and become a legend told by minstrels for years to come."

Romancing SaGa -Minstrel Song- Remastered International touches up and refines a PlayStation 2 remake of the *SaGa* series' console debut, *Romancing SaGa*. Like the original, the remaster offers many people to meet, many problems to solve and a scope that, even three decades later, feels ahead of its time.

Arriving in December 1989, *Makai Toushi SaGa*, released in English as *The Final Fantasy Legend*, was an enormous success, becoming Square's first million unit title, and was eventually localised for North America where it sold another 200,000 copies. This success came as a surprise to everyone, including Kawazu. In issue 180, **Retro Gamer** spoke with Kawazu about the *SaGa* series' origins and legacy, where he said the inspiration for *SaGa* was a desire to make "something different".

But, with *Tetris* moving over 3 million units, Kawazu said the pressure was on despite the diminutive RPGs unprecedented success. Feeling he'd wrapped up *SaGa* in a satisfying way with the single game, Kawazu planned to move onto something else, but Square had other ideas and demanded a sequel. *SaGa 2: Hihou Densetsu* followed in December, 1990, and while it didn't quite reach the first game's sales milestones, it was also successful, and Kawazu had a series on his hands.

Now with two popular Game Boy titles under his belt, Kawazu was approached by Nintendo with a request to create a brand-new *SaGa* game for its upcoming Super Famicom console, along with a third handheld title. Handing off responsibilities for the portable *SaGa 3*, Kawazu turned his attention to the series' first console release – called *Romancing SaGa* in homage to Robert Zemeckis' 1984 romantic adventure film, *Romancing The Stone*.

> "ADVENTURE WILL FIND YOU NO MATTER WHICH CHOICE YOU MAKE. THAT'S THE PATH THE GODS HAVE LAID OUT FOR US, AND YOUR DESTINY WITHIN THAT IS FOR YOU TO CHOOSE"
> *Akitoshi Kawazu*

Like its popular early Super Famicom contemporaries *Final Fantasy IV* and *Dragon Quest V*, *Romancing SaGa* looked more like a souped up NES game than their ground-breaking late-generation counterparts (*Final Fantasy VI*, *Dragon Quest VI*, *Romancing SaGa 3*), but, due to its non-linear structure, its art and world design shines through thanks to diverse opening areas, incredible enemy sprites and great little graphical flourishes like the footprints left behind by characters in the snow.

Perhaps the biggest evolution for the series' console debut was understanding how to reach players on different types of devices. "Portable gaming devices are by their very nature easy to pick up and thus are well suited to multiple short playing sessions," Kawazu tells us today. "Game Boy *SaGa* titles took that nature into consideration by allowing the player to save

» [Super Famicom] Aisha and her furry companions face down monsters and save a new friend.

» [Super Famicom] You don't want to mess with these dinos early in Gray's campaign.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE
- **DEVELOPER:** SQUARE
- **PLATFORM:** SUPER FAMICOM
- **RELEASED:** 1992
- **GENRE:** RPG

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FINAL FANTASY (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: NES
RELEASED: 1987

THE FINAL FANTASY LEGEND
PLATFORM: GAME BOY
RELEASED: 1989

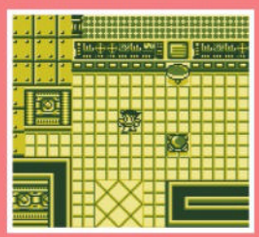
UNLIMITED SAGA
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 2
RELEASED: 2002

» [Super Famicom] I'll come back later when I can afford these.

Before The Romance

THE SAGA SERIES STARTED LIFE ON THE GAME BOY

» [GameBoy] Face down against fierce tigers in *Final Fantasy Legend II*.



■ While *SaGa* has predominantly been known as a console series for the past three decades, it began as an ambitious trilogy of Game Boy games that launched creator Akitoshi Kawazu into a career that's still going strong today. Hot off his work on the *Final Fantasy* series – he was the designer of *Final Fantasy II*'s divisive combat and stat progression system – Kawazu set out to lead his own game for Nintendo's Game Boy. Meant as a standalone title, *Makai Toushi SaGa* arrived in December, 1989 and offered a surprisingly robust portable RPG with a level of customisation and freedom that was rare on the diminutive handheld. It went on to sell over a million units, shocking even Kawazu. Though he meant for it to be a standalone game, the unexpected popularity garnered two more Game Boy sequels before the release of *Romancing SaGa* on the Super Famicom.

Each sequel was bigger and more customisable than the last, with new character classes and an expanding party giving the player more and more of Kawazu's trademark emphasis on player agency and ripe opportunities to replay the games over and over again. By *SaGa 3: Jikuu no Hasha*, now led by Kouji Ide and Chihiro Fujioka, the *SaGa* series was pushing the limits of what Nintendo's popular (and underpowered) handheld was capable of, and they remain some of the most memorable and impressive games on the system.

» [Super Famicom] Please don't tickle Jamil the thief.

» [Super Famicom] Do you love stats? You'll like this then.

» [Super Famicom] Sif leaves a mark wherever she goes.

Meet The Cast

ROMANCING SAGA'S BAND OF MISFITS

Aisha

■ Carefree and compassionate, Aisha is a young herbalist living among the nomadic Taralian people in the Steppes Of Galessa. She might be low on defence, but protect her in the back combat row and watch her magic prowess grow at unprecedented speed.

Albert

■ The picture of a storybook knight, Albert is the son of Lord Rudolf and Lady Mariah. Alongside his sister Diana, he discovers a strange glyph, but before they can deduce its meaning, their home of Isthmus is attacked by the minions of Saruin.

Barbara

■ Bedecked in necklaces and bracelets, dancer Barbara isn't to be underestimated. With decent defence and high compassion, she makes a formidable tank in combat, and can do some serious damage as a physical attacker.

Claudia

■ Claudia's connection to nature and animals makes her a natural ranger. With her animal companions at her side, Claudia saves an Imperial knight under attack by monsters, kicking off her grand adventure that will take her far outside the boughs of Mazewood.

anywhere they wanted, and the freeform game design coupled with the six-hour play time meant that it was possible to enjoy the game many times over."

For home consoles, though, six hours may encompass a single marathon gaming session, so Kawazu designed *Romancing SaGa* for players understanding they'd be entrenched, "soda and chips" by their side, as they explored larger adventures. "By making sure you couldn't reach the end in a single weekend, I wanted to get the player to think about the game even during times when they weren't necessarily able to play."

In order to make this happen and give the player more to process while they were away from the game, Kawazu decided to make his new game far grander than previous titles.

"I knew from the outset that we wanted the player to be able to select their character's name and gender, so we prepared eight pre-set characters," Kawazu tells us today. At the game's outset, players can choose from among these eight protagonists, each with their own starting area, plot, and combat abilities. And, of course, over the course of their adventures, crossovers are a certainty. While Super Famicom cartridges offered far greater storage options than the Game Boy, the biggest challenge in migrating the series was "squeezing data for eight characters into the cartridge".

Being so large, and offering a non-linear console RPG experience, *Romancing SaGa* presented a unique challenge for players used to the more linear console RPGs popular at the time, like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*: players didn't know where to go next.

"The reality is that you can go wherever you want," Kawazu explains. "Open the world map, pick somewhere that looks interesting, or take that boat to the far-off island. It's up to you. Adventure will find you no matter which choice you make. That's the path the gods have laid out for us, and your destiny within that is for you to choose."

Though Kawazu cut his teeth with genre heavyweight Hironobu Sakaguchi on the fairly linear *Final Fantasy* series, as soon as he started working on his own RPGs, he knew he wanted to emphasise player choice in its game systems and narrative structure.

"VIDEOGAMES ARE INHERENTLY A MEDIUM THAT EMPHASIZES PLAYER EXPERIENCE"
Akitoshi Kawazu

"Videogames are inherently a medium that emphasises player experience," Kawazu explains. "You can play through a game two or three times

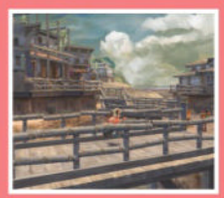
The Original Update

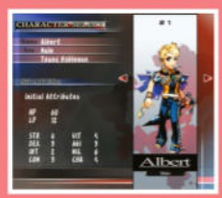
ROMANCING SAGA'S FIRST REMAKE IS A STUNNER

Despite starting life as a Super Famicom game, *Romancing SaGa -Minstrel Song- Remastered International* is a remaster of a remake originally released on the PlaySation 2 in 2005, marking its first official English release. Creator Akitoshi Kawazu told us that following up on the unusual *Unlimited SaGa*, he wanted to "return to the franchise's origins" so he returned to the console roots. "Our goal was to shrink the length of time dedicated to creating a world setting and story to focus on development of the underlying systems, thus avoiding a prolonged development period and all of its associated costs."

The biggest change was the shift from 2D to 3D graphics, a move Kawazu said was done due to its eight protagonists and non-linear structure. "It wasn't possible hardware-wise to provide the same level of visuals as one might find in a *Final Fantasy* game. We couldn't provide ultra-high res textures and modelling, so we chose a design style that emphasised character silhouettes."

Gone are the small, early 16-bit sprites, replaced with highly stylised 3D characters and more complex and varied environments, adding to the game's already strong sense of place.





» [PlayStation2] *Romancing SaGa*'s locations are stunning in 3D.

Gray

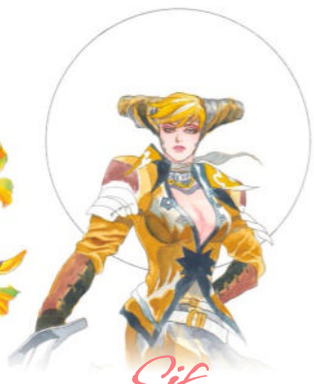
Though a former soldier, this easy-going mercenary has seen it all, though he doesn't seem to remember much about his past. A jack-of-all-trades in combat, Gray offers a tremendous amount of flexibility and customisation.

Hawke

A pirate with a sense of honour, Hawke is an imposing captain of the high seas, but has a wild side when he's rowdy. Sailing the Pirate Coast in Lady Luck, Hawke's luck is challenged when he runs afoul of the upstart pirate captain called Butcher.

Jamil

A thief with a heart of gold who will do anything for a heist. Like Robin Hood before him, Jamil's pickpocket habits benefit those less fortunate around him, but his life drastically changes when he sets out to save his friend Farah from a loan shark.



Sif

She's big. She's bold. And she'll stop at nothing to defend her home village. A beast in combat, Sif's a Valhallan barbarian concerned about climate change among other things, and sets out to restore the glimmer to the Dragon's Eye.

Developer Interview

AKITOSHI KAWAZU'S CONSOLE DEBUT WAS A SAGA TO REMEMBER

■ While many popular series start on consoles and eventually get portable spin-offs, Akitoshi Kawazu's *SaGa* series debuted on the Game Boy, and only reached home consoles three games later with *Romancing SaGa* on the Super Famicom. We spoke with Kawazu about his experience designing the series' console debut, and his pursuit of innovation.

WHERE DID THE CONCEPT FOR THE ORIGINAL *ROMANCING SAGA* ORIGINATE?

The Super Famicom was a huge step up from the Famicom functionally in terms of our ability to express things, and I started with the idea of creating a high-fantasy RPG along the lines of *The Lord Of The Rings*.

SINCE YOUR EARLIEST WORK, YOU'VE BEEN KNOWN FOR EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF CONSOLE RPG GAME DESIGN. WHAT ARE SOME OF *ROMANCING SAGA*'S MOST NOTABLE INNOVATIONS, AND HOW DO YOU FEEL THAT INSPIRED FUTURE RPGS?

The game design is incredibly unique, and I think it was hard for people who came after to mimic. Glimmers, at least, look like something that is easy to copy. Elemental weakness relationships were very common in board games, and Japanese videogame design incorporated those at an early stage, but I'm not sure to what extent our specific implementation affected games that came after.

MANY OF THE MOST POPULAR CONSOLE RPG SERIES FOCUS ON LINEAR STORY STRUCTURES. *ROMANCING SAGA* SKEWS THE OTHER DIRECTION, FOCUSSING HEAVILY ON PLAYER CHOICE AND NON-LINEAR PLOT STRUCTURE. WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS, AND HOW DOES IT CHANGE THE WAY THE PLAYER EXPERIENCES A ROLE-PLAYING GAME?

There are players who are satisfied only playing through a game once or who like to have a shared experience when discussing games with other players. These people might not see the same value in non-linear game design. Personally, I am someone who doesn't place much value on playing a game where everyone has the exact same experience. This naturally comes out in the types of games I create as a result.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE MAKING *ROMANCING SAGA*?

When I look back on it now, we made the original *Romancing SaGa* with an impossibly small team. Four designers, three programmers and two developers including myself. I'm sure it was only possible because we were all so young.

» [Super Famicom] *Romancing SaGa*'s huge world is yours to explore.

if you like." Replaying linear games can be enjoyable, he continued, as you learn more each time and have fun in new ways, but, at some point, you become too strong and it "becomes a little boring". Games with an open-ended structure like *Romancing SaGa*, on the other hand, are, "Effective at drawing in players who enjoy really sinking their teeth into a single title and getting everything they can out of it."

Kawazu wanted to match *Romancing SaGa*'s ambitious narrative structure with an equally unique combat system.

Building off *Final Fantasy II* and his Game Boy titles, *Romancing SaGa* does away with traditional experience points, and instead your characters get stronger by using skills and participating in combat. There are no character levels and combat is, what you make of it.

Taking place on a grid, character placement and movement determines what abilities and weapons can be used, and adds strategy as you decide how best to take down the impressively rendered enemies. *Romancing SaGa* is also packed with optional characters, making party configuration another layer to the game's focus on player agency. Kawazu designed the battle system to scale enemies to match the player's power, making it easier to balance the game, but increasing the difficulty overall.

Unlike the real world, Kawazu continues, you're not going to die of starvation or anything of the sort. "Sure, enemies may knock you out, but that might have been your destiny. If

» [Super Famicom] Barbara's got the sickest ride in town.

"IN FANTASY STORIES, SMALL EPISODES ALL COME TOGETHER TO PAINT A GRAND VISION OF WHAT THE WORLD IS"
Akitoshi Kawazu

you follow your destiny, you'll eventually make your way to Saruin."

From its ambitious beginnings to the popularity of its remakes and remasters, *Romancing SaGa* has always been a story about how we can all change the world if we just take that first step from the comfort of our home and keep going. *Romancing SaGa* might've started with the goal of making a *SaGa* game for the Super Famicom, but decades later, the legacy of Kawazu's work, and his divisive exploratory game design, continues to resonate through the genre he helped popularise in the Eighties.

Kawazu told us that he felt the game's popularity was due to its unique systems and distinctive world settings that weren't found in other games at the time and he has a point, it remains a stylistically gorgeous game with a strong story, interesting NPCs and engaging battles, all married to a sweeping, atmospheric score.

Like all good stories, *Romancing SaGa* is about people, and by embracing player agency, those people are you, us, and the millions of other fans who've played it over the 30 years and more since its release. One step at a time, one journey at a time, one battle, one ending, one new playthrough at a time, we are all that much closer to becoming legends told by minstrels for years to come.

Remaster Q+A

ROMANCING SAGA GOES GLOBAL

Akitoshi Kawazu's game is about to find a new generation of fans around the world thanks to the release of *Romancing SaGa -Minstrel Song- Remastered International*. We spoke with Kawazu and Red Art Games' business development and communications manager Romain Mahut to learn all about this latest release.

Based on the 2005 PlayStation 2 remake, *-Minstrel Song- Remastered*, offers a great opportunity for one of Square Enix's most overlooked series (in the West at least) to find a new audience, according to Romain. "Square Enix is known for series such as *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*," he explains. "*SaGa* is one of its longest-running series and is very popular in Japan but a lot less well known in the West. As big fans of classic Japanese games, we felt that the *SaGa* series deserved to be more easily accessible to Western gamers."

While this desire to grow *SaGa*'s audience in the West was a driving force behind Red Art Games' decision to publish *-Minstrel Song- Remastered*, it also afforded an opportunity to add new features and better visuals.

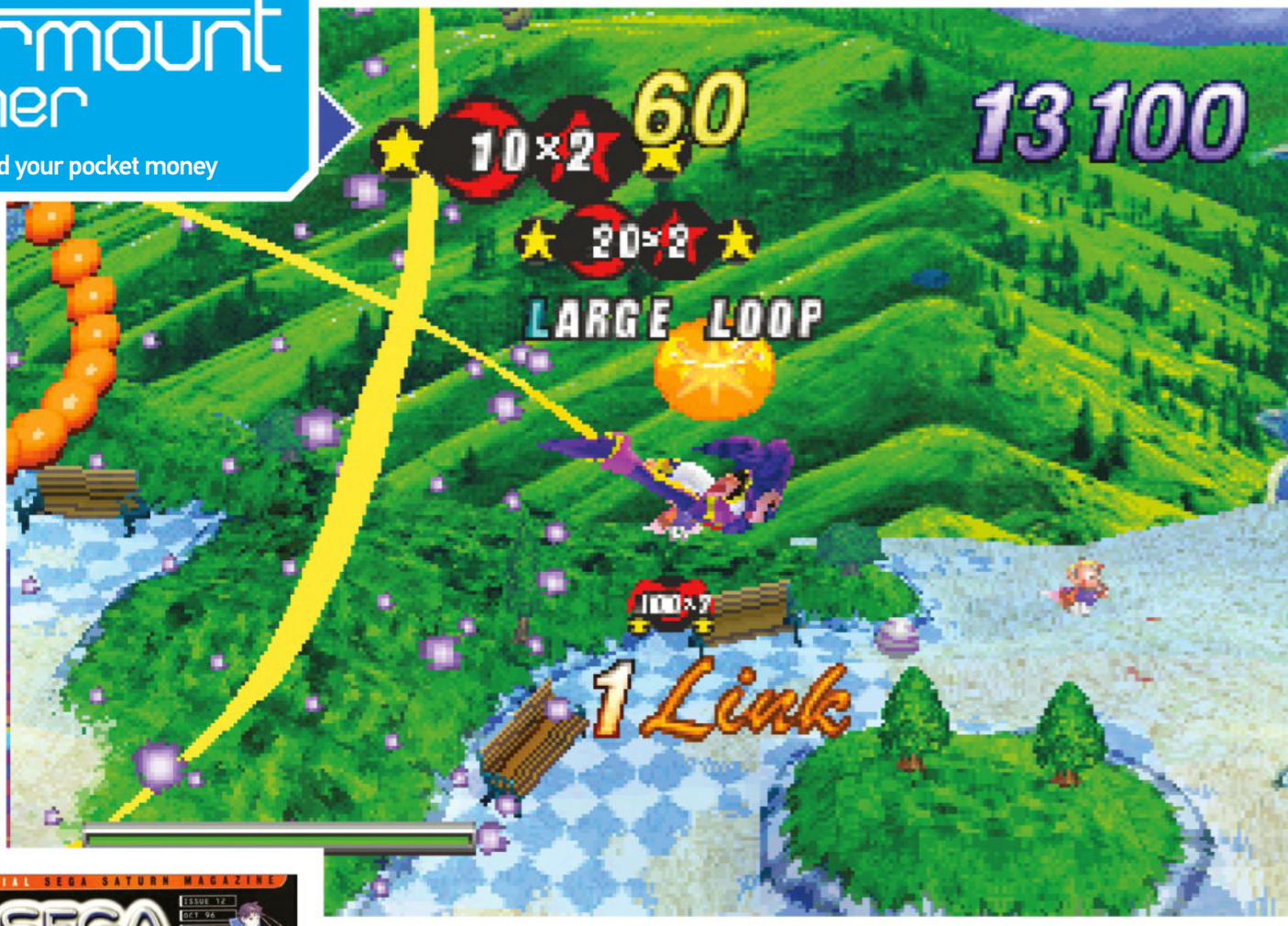
"Hardware processing speed had improved tremendously and we were able to take full advantage of its wonderful controls," says Kawazu. "Although we did have to compromise slightly because of loading times and memory issues, I think we did what we set out to accomplish." Can't argue with that!

"Adding French, Italian, German and Spanish localisation into *-Minstrel Song- Remastered* is something that we are very proud of," adds Romain. "Up until now, the original Romancing *SaGa*'s story could only be played in multiple Asian languages and in English. We believe that it was important to allow Western gamers to experience the rich *SaGa* universe in additional languages."

-Minstrel Song- Remastered is one of many recent remakes and remasters, and Kawazu explained that this recent resurgence is likely fuelled by business reasons. "Even seemingly niche titles can find a good measure of success in remastered and remade versions," he says. New IPs are costly to create, and offer a large risk of failure. "If I were to be a little less charitable, I might say that creators of games that currently dominate the market view the appearance of new IPs as a potential threat, but remakes and remasters of previously released titles pose a little bit less of a concern. I'm sure that current creators don't actually purposefully act in such a way that takes that into consideration, but that is one way to view the situation."

» [Switch] Every RPG is obligated to have a gigantic tree to explore.

» Red Art Games visits the *SaGa* team in Toyko, Japan



» [Saturum] Looping your trails earns precious points, as does linking tricks.

THE OFFICIAL SEGA SATURN MAGAZINE
SEGA SATURN MAGAZINE
NON-CD EDITION
STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 2
Capcom's Ultimate Fighting Game!
HEXEN
Doom sequel hits Saturn!
EXCLUSIVE! First Shots Inside!
DAYTONA
Championship Circuit Edition
PLUS! FIGHTING VIPERS SEGA WORLDWIDE SOCCER '97 VIRTUA FIGHTER 3 TUNNEL B1
OUTRUN DESTRUCTION DERBY BLAM! MACHINEHEAD DOOM VIRTUAL ON AND MORE!

SEGA SATURN MAGAZINE #12

THIS MONTH IN OCTOBER 1996

In the final months of 1996 the Saturn was fighting to keep up with the PlayStation in the battle for living room dominance. The eagerly awaited *Sonic X-Treme* had been cancelled, but Sonic Team had put a new challenger forward. *Sega Saturn Magazine* gave readers their first taste of *NiGHTS: Into Dreams*, alongside *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei* and several other top demos on a Sega-produced coverdisc. This disc itself is a journey, with you zooming through a futuristic corridor into a giant room with a rotating video screen as its centrepiece. The whole production oozes quality, and Sega's unique spirit.

WITH THE FIFTH CONSOLE GENERATION, A DEMO COULD OFTEN MEAN EXPERIENCING SOMETHING YOU NEVER HAD BEFORE, AND THAT WAS NEVER TRUER THAN ON THE SATURN. BOLDLY EXPERIMENTAL, THIS MONTH'S DISC SHOWS SEGA AT ITS INIMITABLE BEST. IT'S SUCH A SHAME WE DON'T GET COVERDISCS LIKE THIS TODAY

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

» [Saturum] Sometimes it's nice to ignore all the madness and just fly about for a bit.

THE MAIN EVENT: NIGHTS INTO DREAMS

NiGHTS is as much a dream as a game. For gamers still unfamiliar with 3D worlds, *NiGHTS* was an intoxicating foray into a new kind of space. Playing it now it's hard to recapture the sense of newness it delivered. Sonic Team's wild creativity bursts through the levels, full of sudden changes of direction, the timer encouraging you to charge forward into the unknown chaos ahead.

The demo includes the first two levels, along with bosses. Since scoring is so key to the game, with grades given after each section and level, it's a perfect demo for repeat play.

Starting as one of two children, Claris or Elliot, you soon assume the form of NiGHTS and next you're zipping through the levels, spinning and whirling through the rings, trying to round up the orbs which unlock the end of each stage.

The real trick is in high scores though, which means delaying your progress so you can bag more points. Run out of time and you'll switch back to child form, where you risk being awakened from your dream by the roving alarm clock pursuing you through the level.

There's also the innovative A-life system you can easily not notice, that lets you grow and evolve the level's inhabitants. The Nightopians

» [Saturn] This boss goes crashing through pillars as NiGHTS hurls her through the level.

» [Saturn] Gliding in on the back of your dragon. Once the action starts you'll scarcely notice the God rays.

lay eggs that hatch into different forms and their moods even affect the level music. The technology would eventually become the Chao found in *Sonic Adventure*.

Perhaps the most Sega game ever, sequel aside, there's never been anything remotely like it before or since. *NiGHTS*, like many of the games on the disc, was different, and shows Sega at the height of its power, confident and unafraid to follow its most creative visions.

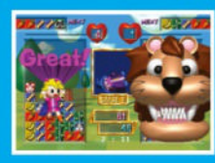
PLAY THIS NEXT: PANZER DRAGOON II ZWEI

This fantastic prequel to Sega's captivating on-rails shooter lets you ride your dragon again, with your gun paired with your mount's laser as you blast your way through an evocative world filled with strange creatures. *Zwei* lightens the difficulty compared to the original classic by adding a Berserk Mode that greatly powers your dragon. The superb demo lets you play through the game's third level, a mysterious forest. It's beautifully designed and wonderful to play, both majestic and frantic as you fight to lock your weapons onto the oncoming bestiary, ducking and weaving to avoid their return fire. Developer Team Andromeda would eventually merge into Smilebit after finishing off *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, the series' masterful RPG spin-off.

» [Saturn] *Panzer Dragoon Zwei II* piles on the spectacle, with arcing lasers and enemies that rarely keep still.

Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST



BAKU BAKU ANIMAL DEMO

■ A puzzle game so gleefully unhinged you could easily overlook how good it is. You're trying to get a job as a royal zookeeper, and must prove yourself by matching blocks. Each colour is a food which needs its corresponding animal block to begin eating it in a glorious frenzy of 3D munching. Build a successful chain and you get to delight in the flurry of animal heads that chomp their way across the screen.

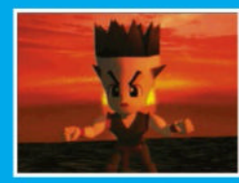
ATHLETE KINGS DEMO

■ Arriving just after the Atlanta Olympics, *Athlete Kings* is a lively athletics game from Sega's AM3. Opening with a glorious Sega blue sky, the demo lets you try three of the ten decathlon events. There's the button-mashing 100m and long jump, along with the shot put, which relies purely on timing. With eight quirky characters to choose from, there's a lot of simple, competitive fun to be had, and the game scored 91% in the mag.

SEGA WORLDWIDE SOCCER '97 DEMO

■ This was a much-improved entry in the *Victory Goal* series and plays an engaging game of football, scoring 94% in the magazine. Sadly, the demo itself only lasts one half, but you get a full roster of international teams, and several game modes.

DEMO MOVIE



■ The disc also had a video showing off four games. There's *Virtua Fighter 2* derived Chibi beat-'em-up *Virtua Fighter Kids* and a look at the sequel *Story Of Thor 2*. There's also the Hungarian beat-'em-up oddity *Three Dirty Dwarves*, and the Egyptian-themed FPS *Exhumed*.

THE MAKING OF CASPER

CASPER WAS A HUGE HOLLYWOOD RELEASE WITH A $55 MILLION BUDGET AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF STEVEN SPIELBERG. SO HOW DID A TEAM OF NORWAY DEVELOPERS WITH LITTLE GAMING EXPERIENCE GET TO MAKE IT? WE SPEAK TO RAGNAR TØRNQUIST AND ERIK GLØERSEN TO FIND OUT

WORDS BY SEAN COLE

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** INTERPLAY
- **DEVELOPER:** FUNCOM
- **PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION, SATURN, 3DO
- **RELEASED:** 1996
- **GENRE:** ACTION ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

THE LONGEST JOURNEY
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 1999

ANARCHY ONLINE
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 2001

THE SECRET WORLD (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 2012

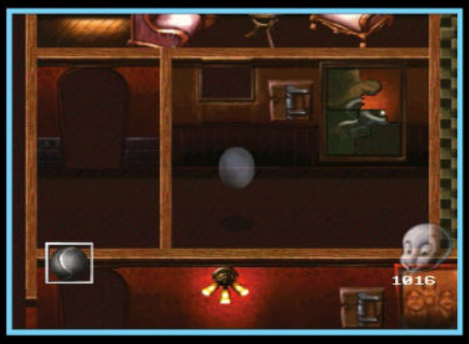
Ragnar Tørnquist has one abiding memory of his first day at the Funcom offices in Oslo. It was October 1994 and the company, which had only been founded a year earlier, was expanding rapidly. Its latest recruit arrived at his desk and saw that there was no computer. It was empty aside from a single document, the screenplay for *Casper*.

Thousands of miles away in Hollywood, anticipation was rising. The film had already been shot and was due to hit screens in just seven months. Masterminded by Steven Spielberg, there was huge excitement over its pioneering use of special effects and computer-generated imagery. Funcom had been enlisted to create a game that would coincide with *Casper*'s cinema release. "I was thrown in at the deep end with a deadline and a budget and a team who hadn't started," says Ragnar. "They were just waiting for somebody to come in and tell them what to do – that was me. I was probably deeply unqualified, but we made it work."

After graduating in film and television studies from New York University, Ragnar returned to Norway and joined Funcom. Like most of his colleagues, he was young and creative, but hugely inexperienced. At 24 years old, and having never made a game before, he was put in charge of *Casper* and almost immediately sent to meet Brad Silberling, the film's director, in Los Angeles. "You had to just put on this face, this costume, and be professional. That made us professional. It was fun to be granted such an enormous opportunity. That could only have happened at that time. I was extremely lucky."

Funcom was Norway's first game development company, so the team had no template to follow. Everyone was learning on the job, including Erik Gløersen, the president and CEO. He met publishers around the world and struck deals on a wide variety of projects, starting with another film adaptation, *A Dinosaur's Tale*. "We were able to get these really high-profile games early on because the cost of living was cheaper than in the US, and

» [PlayStation] Use the buzzsaw morph power to cut through wooden planks blocking off doorways.



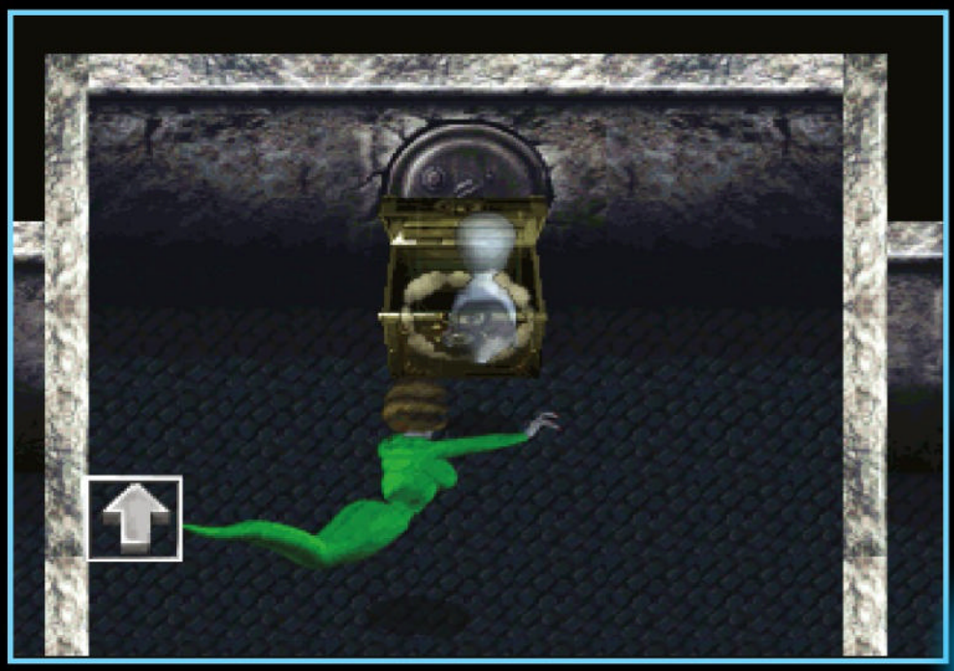
» [PlayStation] Morphing into a ball enables Casper to bounce through holes in the walls.

RAGNAR TØRNQUIST

■ *Casper*'s writer and designer now runs Red Thread Games, which is working on two new titles, including *Hello Sunshine*, a narrative survival adventure.

ERIK GLØERSEN

■ One of Funcom's cofounders, Erik is now a partner in SISU Game Ventures, which provides funding and advice to help game developers.



» [PlayStation] To complete the game, Casper must open the final chest to lock Carrigan inside.

we were new, so we didn't really know what to charge yet. I only found that out when I kept turning down a deal that I didn't want to do. The first offer for development funding ended up being about one third of what they would be willing to pay," laughs Erik. "I really had no idea what I was doing. I was probably 21 by the time we had 150 employees and three studios in three different countries. It went very quickly and a big part of that was the demoscene."

> "THERE WAS A LINE OF DIALOGUE WHERE CASPER INSPECTS A TOILET AND SAYS, 'THIS IS WHERE I DO MY GHOSTLY POOS.' IT WAS CHILDISH AND COMPLETELY UNNECESSARY. INTERPLAY FOUND THAT LINE AND THE FAX WE GOT IN RETURN WAS INCREDIBLE. WE HAD AN EMERGENCY PHONE CALL LATE AT NIGHT"
> **RAGNAR TØRNQUIST**

The European demoscene exploded during the Nineties. For fun, a ragtag network of self-taught programmers and artists spent countless hours testing the limits of both their hardware and their abilities. Sharing the same experimental, DIY ethos, they loved to compete against each other and show off their work. Funcom eagerly hired the most talented members of the demoscene to accelerate the company's growth.

Ragnar was in awe of their skills. "There are technical challenges that are seared into my mind. The PlayStation dev kit only had Japanese instructions. We had amazing programmers from demo backgrounds, who solved that," he says. "I remember so clearly the first time we had Casper up on this black screen. Just being able to see the character, and control it, was an accomplishment. That's why I look at game engines today and think, 'Holy shit!' What you can do in one day took us months back then."

Everything had to be created from scratch, including a tool that enabled Ragnar to work directly on the game. "It allowed me to do some basic design and write text and dialogue. Things I was actually skilled at, although that didn't always land particularly well with Interplay. There was a line of dialogue where Casper inspects a toilet and says, 'This is where I do my ghostly poos.' It was childish and completely unnecessary. Interplay found that line and the fax we got in return was incredible. We had an emergency phone call late at night, saying, 'If Steven Spielberg sees this, you guys are going to be thrown off the project.' I was both horrified and incredibly proud."

For better or worse, Funcom's Oslo office was a boisterously informal and unstructured place to work. "It was managed chaos. It was all flying by the seat of their pants," says Ragnar. "There were a lot of promises thrown around without any kind of grounding. There was no training. There was a lack of processes and pipelines. There was drama, conflict, politics, partying. But when it came to the designing and the writing, my memories are just positive. I think that came easily because we had a bunch of creative people in a room. We all sat in one office so you could swivel your chair around and talk to each other. You were able to work late, through the night."

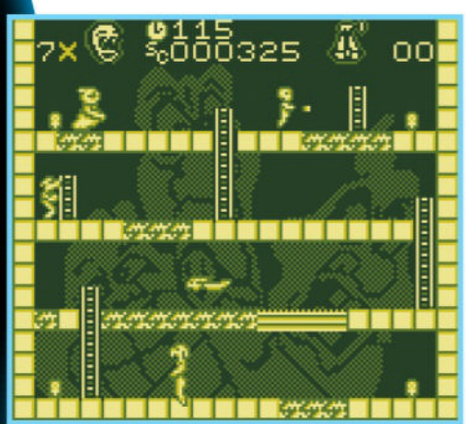
CASPER CONSTRAINED

A LIMITED GAME BOY TITLE FADED INTO OBSCURITY

Hampered by rudimentary graphics and derivative gameplay, a very different version of *Casper* was released for the Game Boy. Developed by Bonsai Entertainment, players must complete a series of minigames to earn points and collect Ooz, which is used to power the Lazarus machine.

There are three levels, each consisting of progressively harder versions of the same four minigames. There's a simple crosshair shooter, and a platformer in the style of *Donkey Kong* or *Lode Runner*. You also have to prevent falling books from hitting the ground, and correctly place a selection of items to complete a task. Failing at any of the games costs you a life and leads to an animation showing Casper being kicked out of Whipstaff.

After making it through the three levels, you have to avoid the obstacles while guiding Kat (Casper's human friend) down to the laboratory on the Up And At 'Em machine. Completing a simple memory game and collecting some final Ooz enables you to bring Dr Harvey (Kat's father) back to life in time for Kat and Casper to have a celebratory dance. Mercifully short, you can be done in half an hour.



» [Game Boy] Climb the ladders and collect the Ooz while avoiding Casper's uncles.

» [PlayStation] When Casper opens a chest, Fatso will occasionally pop out to attack him.

PUNISHING PLAYERS

FUNCOM'S CASPER WAS NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT TO COMPLETE

A deceptively tough task lay beneath *Casper*'s child-friendly surface. Young players were often foiled by elusive keys or esoteric puzzles and never completed the game. Some lateral thinking, and a lot of trial and error, can be required to forge links between the items you pick up and the tasks you need to complete.

Time constraints left Ragnar and his team to gauge the game's difficulty themselves on the fly. "There was no academic thought behind it. It was more about having played games and assembled this collection of tools – the keys and the different shapes that Casper could take on – that would make the game understandable, and also a little bit challenging. There was no market research or playtesting with kids."

Without a map to refer to, the game becomes a serious test of both patience and memory too. Frustration can easily set in if you get stuck. "We thought about adding a map, but we ended up not doing it because we worried that it would cut down gameplay time," says Erik. "It is quite punishing. If you don't play with a notebook, it's hard to remember where everything goes."

As you explore
Whipstaff Manor,
it's a good idea to draw a map
to keep track of your progress.
This is a big house, and it's
easy to get lost!
Press X button to continue.

Those late nights working on the game meant that sleepovers were inevitable. "We even had people living in the office," recalls Erik. "I remember our audio director had a tarantula in a glass cage and sometimes it got out! It was more like a university dorm than a company, but that was also what I loved about it. In the beginning, it was *Animal House*, and it was awesome."

> "WE EVEN HAD PEOPLE LIVING IN THE OFFICE. I REMEMBER OUR AUDIO DIRECTOR HAD A TARANTULA IN A GLASS CAGE AND SOMETIMES IT GOT OUT"
> **ERIK GLØERSEN**

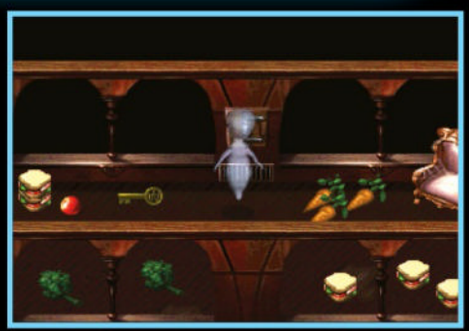
Amid the chaos, Ragnar gave *Casper* a clear sense of direction, inspired by his love of LucasArts' adventure games like *Day Of The Tentacle* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island*. Using a top-down perspective, players were encouraged to comb their surroundings – finding items, unlocking doors and solving puzzles.

The entirety of the game takes place in Whipstaff Manor, the primary setting for the film, and its grounds. A faithful recreation of the sprawling mansion house, inspired by the Gothic and art nouveau designs of Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi, was one of *Casper*'s greatest strengths. The rooms are full of character, period detail and faded grandeur. "It was a beautiful movie and we did work hard to replicate that look," says Ragnar. "Obviously our tools at the time were limited. There was 3D Studio and Photoshop. I can remember the colours being warm, but contrasting with the blue of the ghosts, so you had the living and the dead. We had some amazingly skilled artists, who were able to take what they were doing on the film and translate it into pixels."

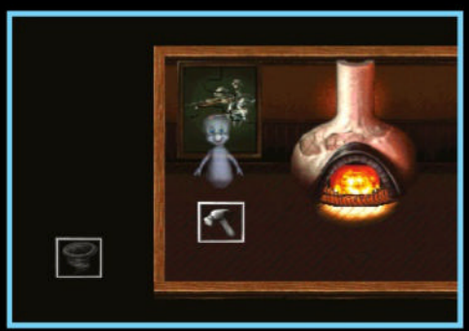
"It was one of the first games we ever developed where we were creating 2D content from 3D models," adds Erik. "Everything in the game is 2D, but it was rendered in 3D into sprites, so that was new for us. It does have an interesting look and feel because of that."

With its junk-filled attic, austere cellar and playful hedge maze, Whipstaff has real depth and texture. While the scenery and furnishings are largely static, there are some notable exceptions. Anything you can interact with – chairs, switches, buttons, chests etc – will potentially aid your progress, but *Casper* is full of surprises and some elements are designed to mislead.

Therefore, the sound of a metal door clanking open to reveal a previously unexplored area is inherently rewarding. Although Whipstaff is quite large, boasting many concealed routes and secret rooms, players are often sent back and forth in search of their next step. "The PlayStation was new and there was a lot more content needed for a game on a CD than on a cartridge," says Erik. "We came up with a plan to make a game that was really tight and small. The best way to do that, and still have all the content that people

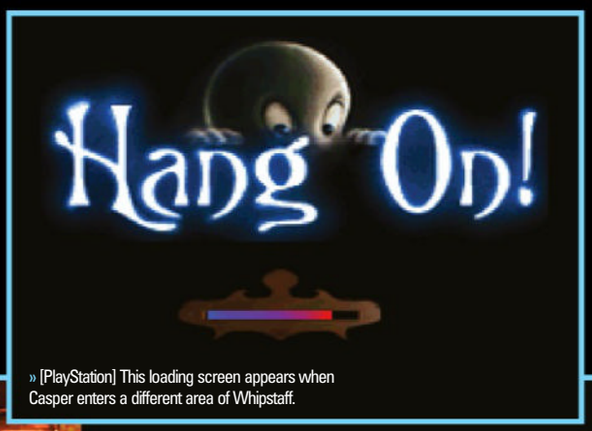


» [PlayStation] Eating food gives Casper health points, which are needed to use his morph powers.



» [PlayStation] Here's Casper earning the hammer morph power for putting a puzzle back together.

» [PlayStation] Spray Kat's perfume at Stinky to defeat him and reclaim a missing Lazarus piece.



» [PlayStation] This loading screen appears when Casper enters a different area of Whipstaff.

» [PlayStation] Use the smoke morph power to traverse Whipstaff, entering one vent and emerging from another.

» [PlayStation] Finding the cellular integrator in Act III sets up the final battle with Carrigan.

would expect, was to make a game where you would have to backtrack a lot and that played a lot longer than it should."

Throughout the game, Casper must put together various puzzles. Each one unlocks a new morph power, enabling him to transform into a different object, including a fan, a ball, a buzzsaw and a lightbulb. Some grant you access to new areas, like turning into smoke to travel through vents, while others help you defeat Casper's uncles – Stretch, Stinky and Fatso – and rebuild the Lazarus machine, which can bring ghosts back to life.

The original release date was pushed back, so *Casper* eventually came out in late-1996. Logicware took over from Funcom to finalise the 3DO version. Capitalising on interest in the film, which was made available on home video around the same time, the game was marketed heavily and sold in huge quantities.

Reviews for *Casper* were middling. Many praised the look and premise, but found the gameplay limited. Almost all featured one specific complaint: why can't Casper travel through walls? "That question has haunted me for 30 years!" laughs Ragnar. "It obviously wasn't really a technical challenge; it was more of a design challenge. Having worked in games for decades, there are so many solutions. I think it was a lack of imagination and a lack of experience. I think the game would have been a lot better, or more interesting, if you were able to pass through walls. I really regret not trying harder to figure out how to do that. That broke with everything in the movie. That could have been turned into something really cool."

As a complete novice, Ragnar handled this tricky first project well, turning the screenplay of *Casper* into a successful game at short notice. He learned so much during the process and will never forget the thrill of seeing the finished product on sale. "That's still the best feeling in the world. It still amazes me and makes me want to get out of bed in the morning. That's what it's all about. It was a huge sense of pride and accomplishment seeing the thing you put so many hours into, and struggled with, turning into a real thing," says Ragnar. "My career wouldn't exist without *Casper*. It wasn't the greatest game of its generation, but it sold well and reached kids, and others, who liked it. What more can you ask for? It was the first step in every single way."

» [PlayStation] Casper's inventory shows all the items, puzzle pieces, keys and morph powers he's collected.

» [PlayStation] A blueprint of the Lazarus machine showing that there's still one piece left to find.

Half-Life

LATE TO THE PARTY

» PC » 1998 » VALVE SOFTWARE

Believe it or not, but I didn't play *Half-Life* when it first came out. I was well aware of its acclaim and I desperately wanted to experience the adventures of Gordon Freeman for myself, but there was a rather big problem – my humble PC wasn't good enough to run it.

Back then, the PC I owned with my wife Melanie was mainly used for doing adult-type stuff and gaming typically wasn't as important to me on it. After all, I had an N64 which we did most of our gaming on and I had quickly learnt that most modern games struggled to run on my humble system and *Half-Life* was no exception.

In fact, it wasn't until I started on *games™* that I finally managed to play Valve's masterpiece, a good five years after it first came out. By then of course my new PC was a lot more capable than what I'd first owned and I soon began to realise why Valve's game was so acclaimed.

There's a tremendous sense of place to *Half-Life* thanks to some excellent world-building, tight level design and wonderful character interactions. Gordon might be a silent protagonist but *Half-Life*'s world is alive with chatter and it's hard not to get drawn into the immersive conversations that happen all around you, as you do your best to help aid the other beleaguered Black Mesa scientists.

Even though five years is a gulf in gaming terms and I'd already experienced Bungie's excellent *Halo* by the time I properly played *Half-Life*, it simply didn't matter. The quality of Valve's game still shone as brightly as the beam of light from Gordon's trusty torch. And as that torch illuminated the darkness for Gordon, Valve's game felt equally illuminating to me. I may have been late to the party, but the party in question was still going and *Half-Life* is the type of game where you don't really need to be there from the beginning, you simply need to experience it. ✱

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THE EVOLUTION OF RAYMAN

RAYMAN'S BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED, VIBRANTLY COLOURFUL 2D DEBUT WAS AN UNEXPECTED LAUNCH TITLE FOR THE 3D-FOCUSSED PLAYSTATION, BUT ITS RESOUNDING SUCCESS LED TO A STRING OF SEQUELS. RAYMAN CREATOR MICHEL ANCEL EXPLAINS HOW THE SERIES EVOLVED

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [SNES] Before it came out, *Rayman* was prototyped on systems such as the Atari ST and SNES.

» [Atari Jaguar] The Jaguar version of *Rayman* came out slightly earlier than the better-knowvn PlayStation release.

■ *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel directed many titles in the series before leaving the games industry in 2020.

When you compare it with other major UK PlayStation launch titles, *Rayman* stands out for a more fundamental reason than its whimsical world or compelling platforming. Unlike the 3D polygon-powered *Ridge Racer*, *WipEout* and *Battle Arena Toshinden*, Ubisoft's next-generation release was unapologetically 2D and entirely sprite-based. With hindsight, this approach seems like flying in the face of common sense, but *Rayman*'s point of difference nevertheless paid off.

This success by way of differentiation hadn't been planned, however, instead the whimsical but challenging title was a product of a long development across multiple systems. *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel remembers the platformer that ultimately helped launch the PlayStation starting out as a distinctly solo project. "The first prototype was on the Atari ST. I was doing everything by myself: the graphics, music, gameplay and programming," Michel points out. "I later worked with an English developer on a prototype for the PC, because we wanted to make a PC version at first. From that we pitched the concept to Ubisoft. Because we had so many graphics and content, the idea was to make a Super Nintendo CD-Rom version, but Nintendo's add-on was never released. Then Atari came out with the Jaguar. Its sprite system was good, so it was perfect, even though it was cartridge-based. But at the same time the PC was emerging as a gaming machine, so some people at Ubisoft ported *Rayman* to the PC and prepared the move to the Saturn and PlayStation."

While developing *Rayman*, an important consideration for Michel was creating a distinct look for his game's titular hero. As a result of using a sprite-based arts package he found himself giving Rayman a head, body, feet and hands but no neck, arms or legs – like a puppet. As well as saving time, effort and memory, this made the floppy-haired protagonist stand out from the crowd. "I don't think there were any problems with Rayman not having a neck, arms or legs," Michel considers. "The good thing was the simplicity behind the concept. Looking back, if you apply the mantra that less is more then Rayman had less! But the idea gave *more* because although it was simplistic it was enough to create a nice character. I had created something unique. I also had less work because I didn't have to have all the combinations of animations and drawing everything. I just had to move the little sprites of the hands and feet to give the feeling of moving. When the hands were moving at the same time as the body you got the feeling that they were all connected, so you didn't need arms and legs."

> "I DON'T THINK THERE WERE ANY PROBLEMS WITH RAYMAN NOT HAVING A NECK, ARMS OR LEGS. THE GOOD THING WAS THE SIMPLICITY BEHIND THE CONCEPT"
> **MICHEL ANCEL**

The positive reception *Rayman* received when it appeared on the 2D-friendly Atari Jaguar was not unexpected. But given that it was a sprite-based game conceived long before the arrival of 3D-focussed consoles, its fortunes a few months later on the soon-to-be-released PlayStation were less certain. Regardless of what prospective PlayStation buyers might feel, Sony wasn't taking any chances. So much so that *Rayman* was missing from the console's public unveiling. "A funny story is that Ubisoft had a booth with the PlayStation *Rayman* at the ECTS in London where Sony premiered the PlayStation, and the booth wasn't on the Sony floor because it just wanted 3D games," Michel recalls. "It would have been a bit of a shame for it to have a 2D game, and we could understand that on the marketing side. It was showing its console for the first time and it was showing off its 3D ability. But it's funny, because someone told me that *Rayman* was the best-selling PlayStation launch title in the UK! It's crazy, because if we had told the guys at Sony that this game that wasn't allowed on its floor would sell so well in the UK they wouldn't have believed us." ▶

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: ECLECTIC EFFORTS

SPORTING, MULTIPLAYER AND ISOMETRIC OUTINGS

RAYMAN GOLF

This colourful mobile title certainly looks the part, although Rayman only appears when he's swinging a club. There are power and direction meters with gauges that zip back and forth until you hit stop, a choice of clubs, and wind speed to take account of.

RAYMAN M

A fun multiplayer game with several modes, *Rayman M* has both racing and battle challenges. The former involves tackling obstacle courses and eliminator races, while the latter gets you to collect Lums, freeze rivals and score points by holding onto a fly.

RAYMAN: HOODLUMS' REVENGE

The basic mechanics of the 3D *Rayman* games work remarkably well in this isometric GBA title. The hero's telescopic fist and helicopter gliding are both there, and there's plenty of platforming. You also have to find and flick switches to open level exits.

» [PlayStation] Rayman lacking limbs was originally a technical necessity, but it works brilliantly as a visual.

Given how popular *Rayman*'s debut on the PlayStation had been despite or perhaps because of it being 2D, it follows that the obvious move would be to make a similarly sprite-based follow-up. This wasn't ultimately the case, but doing so was the first instinct of the team behind *Rayman*. Their sequel did task players with collecting creatures called Lums, like in the original, but this time specified quantities were required to unlock certain areas. "We made a 2D prototype that we presented at E3, but it was the year when *Mario 64* and *Crash Bandicoot* arrived, so we realised it was time to move to 3D," Michel remembers. "So we moved on to making *Rayman 2*, which was really fun to work on. Collecting Lums to unlock levels was just a way to control part of the player's achievements with something that allowed them to choose how to do that. In *Rayman* you had to save Electoons, so you had a system there too. It was also to create different collection experiences for different players: the ones that really wanted to explore and the ones that just wanted to play through to the end. It also rewarded players for going back to explore earlier levels."

> "WE MADE A 2D PROTOTYPE, BUT IT WAS THE YEAR WHEN MARIO 64 AND CRASH BANDICOOT ARRIVED, SO WE REALISED IT WAS TIME TO MOVE TO 3D"
>
> **MICHEL ANCEL**

Another evolution came with *Rayman 2*'s introduction of Murphy The Greenbottle. In *Rayman*, a pre-level navigable overworld had flagged-up upcoming hazards and set the scene. In the sequel, Murphy appeared in-game when pointers were required or the story needed to be moved forward. Being a greenbottle, he was always on the wing, and so it made sense that he would be flitting in and out of areas that were tricky to get around on foot. "In a game like *Rayman 2* when the player goes into the action you want to give them information, and I think it was better than just having something written on a board or whatever," Michel reasons. "It was just more interesting to have a character that could carry information. That was why he was flying, because then he was able to appear in different places. That made him very flexible and it was warmer than having writing on a panel in the world. So it was more immersive. That was why we created the character for *Rayman 2*. It would have been nice to have him in *Rayman*, but in big 3D games when you are with a teammate it's nice to have storytelling and lore while you're playing."

» [PlayStation] As ranged weapons go, Rayman's telescopic fist is an amusing and inspired example.

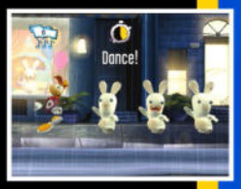
STAGES OF EVOLUTION: RAVING RABBIDS

RAYMAN AND THE RABBIDS' CRAZY PARTY GAMES

RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS

Originally designed around the Wii Remote and Nunchuk, *Raving Rabbids* has you frantically using the peripherals in a series of manic minigames. Besides rhythm challenges and memory tests, there are sports events and family friendly first-person shooters to enjoy.

RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS 2



Its minigames are broadly of the same type as the original's, but the sequel innovates in other areas. Many of its challenges are simultaneous multiplayer tests of skill instead of turn-based ones, and these minigames are set in five geographic regions.

RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS: TV PARTY

This TV channel-themed effort puts the Wii Balance Board to good use in minigames involving everything from dancing and keeping fit to racing down hills on the belly of a yak! Its other events range from flipping burgers to demolishing cities, Godzilla-style.

» [Nintendo 64] In order to unlock new areas in *Rayman 2* you have to secure the required number of Lums.

» [Nintendo 64] A new projectile weapon in *Rayman 2* sees the floppy-haired hero throwing explosive barrels at foes.

» [Nintendo 64] Securing four elemental masks is key to regaining Rayman's full powers in *Rayman 2*.

» [Nintendo 64] As well as platforming in 3D, *Rayman 2* sets other physical challenges such as wall-crawling.

One further development of the gameplay established by the original game resulted in the second *Rayman* title tasking players with carrying around huge fruits and barrels of explosives, since riding around on fruit was deemed too tricky to pull off in 3D. The effort of moving items from place to place had consequences, but there were benefits to using them when you reached your destination, and this meant that transporting them involved strategy. "In *Rayman* you had the ability to make fruit bounce on the heads of characters, and then you could also jump about on it," Michel reviews. "We thought that it could be interesting in 3D, but it was very difficult to have control of bouncing things, and picking them up and carrying them was more precise. So the barrels were just an extension of the fruit. It was nice that at some points you could trigger the things you carried. Like the barrels, which if you took close to a flame, became rockets. Although when you were carrying things you couldn't attack and were a bit slower. So there was a nice trade off where you had to put what you were carrying down, attack and then pick it back up."

If anything, the response to *Rayman 2* was even more enthusiastic than that of its predecessor. It was considered by many to be a new benchmark for 3D platforming, its beautiful visuals were highly praised and its camera was judged to set new standards. Its successor *Rayman 3* was wildly ambitious, with one aspect of its design turning Rayman back and forth between normal and super-heroic forms with different short-lived powers in different levels. "I just worked ▶

» [GameCube] Unlike other core *Rayman* titles, you get points for collecting Lums and other actions in *Rayman 3*.

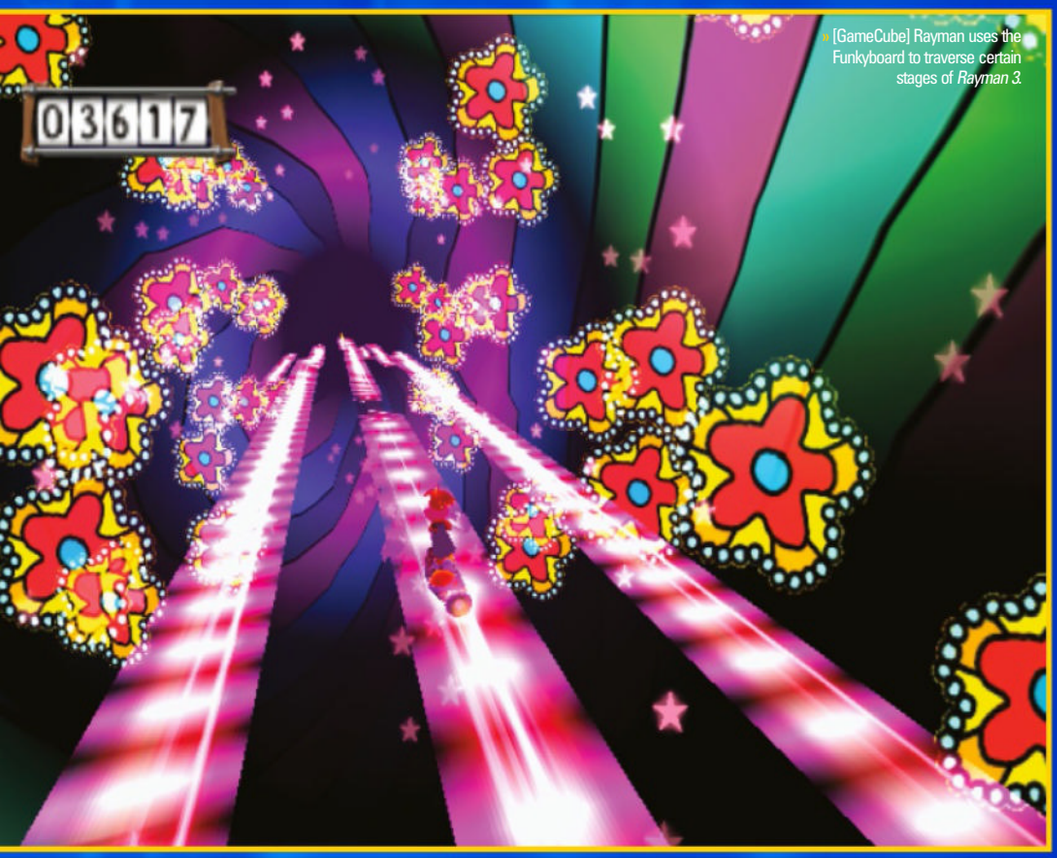
» [GameCube] Temporary area-specific power-ups like the lockjaw gauntlet are a major aspect of *Rayman 3*.

» [GameCube] *Rayman 3*'s Shock Rocket is a guided missile that you have to steer towards its target.

» [GameCube] *Rayman 3*'s Heavy Metal Fist doubles the strength of Rayman's standard fist attack.

▶ on *Rayman 3* a little bit at the beginning because I was working on *Beyond Good & Evil*, so some of the people that worked on *Rayman 2* handled *Rayman 3*," Michel explains. "I believe that the team limited the abilities because it was way more complex when you had permanent abilities because you had to make them work in the earlier levels too. I remember they made a lot of prototypes, and then at some point they simplified some of the mechanics. It was just easier to make the abilities non-permanent, because if they were localised then you just had to make the game handle them locally. Otherwise they would have had to make sure they were OK in every corner of the game."

Another area where *Rayman 3* was differentiated was with its achievements system. Instead of collecting Lums or freeing Teensies being measures of progress, players of this third *Rayman* outing scored points. These were handed out not just for collecting items but also for other successful actions. This removal of a focus on periodic achievement allowed the game's designers to incorporate setpieces that were driven by narrative instead of being dependent on meeting targets. "It was a way to make things simpler," Michel assesses. "Scoring points was something people understood easily, and I think awarding points was more applicable than collecting Lums because you could give points for many reasons and achievements. I think the *Rayman 3* team really made some quite nice and original things, like the boss that you defeated and then controlled. So they focussed on big things, and they



» [GameCube] Rayman uses the Funkyboard to traverse certain stages of *Rayman 3*.

didn't want to make the game too complex to play. The points system was one way to simplify things; to streamline the player's progress and make it easy to understand. Scoring points was a very arcade-orientated way of creating an evaluation of the player's achievements, and I think the team just wanted to go back to that to simplify things."

> "THE MAIN IDEA WAS TO CREATE A GAME THAT USED THE GRAPHIC POWER THAT WAS SUPERIMPORTANT FOR 3D BUT WAS EVEN BETTER FOR 2D"
> **MICHEL ANCEL**

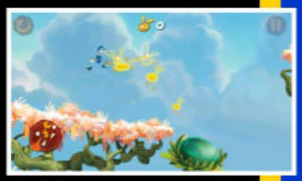
Although it garnered solid reviews and sold well when it came out, *Rayman 3* wasn't quite the unqualified success that its predecessors had been. Several years passed before a fourth core *Rayman* title was begun, during which time a number of popular spin-off games were released. When Michel Ancel finally continued the main series with *Rayman Origins* in 2011 it was a return to 2D gaming that added local co-op multiplayer to the mix. "The main idea was to create a game that used the graphic power that was superimportant for 3D but was even better for 2D," Michel observes. "So it had a bit of the same history as *Rayman* where we could really create something that was different. We realised we were able to work directly with concept artists working on their tablets; we could directly use their art in *Rayman Origins*. So it was a very straightforward way of making a game. The other idea was zooming in and out of the screen, which wasn't possible with very early 2D consoles. So when you played with four players the game would zoom out so you could see a bit more of where all the guys were on the screen."

Another of *Rayman Origins*' innovations came in the form of 'bubblizing', which happened in both solo and multiplayer modes instead of its player characters dying. In single-player games, the hero would get trapped in a bubble that would burst and send them back to a checkpoint. But in multiplayer mode, 'bubblized' characters could be returned to the fray if another player burst their bubbly trap while they were floating around in it. "I think that was very close to what they did in a *Mario* game that you could also play with four players," Michel acknowledges. "I think they used the same kind of system where you were counting on the other players to let you back into the game. It was a soft system compared to having to wait until the next checkpoint. It was ▶

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: RAYMAN RUNNERS

THE EPIC RAYMAN ENDLESS RUNNER TRILOGY

RAYMAN JUNGLE RUN



This compelling smartphone release uses assets from *Rayman Origins*, but it's an endless runner with platforming instead of a traditional platformer. One-tap actions see you through short levels, with the overall goal being to collect a set numbers of Lums.

RAYMAN FIESTA RUN

Besides having themes other than jungle ones, *Fiesta Run* introduces swimming, shrinking and sliding. Its other new features include boss fights, and bouncing between the background and foreground. By acing its levels you can unlock harder versions of them.

RAYMAN ADVENTURES

Of the various innovations in *Rayman Adventures*, the debut of creatures known as Incrediballs has the most impact on the gameplay established by *Jungle Run*. Once you've rescued them they can find things, protect the player character and inhale nearby Lums.

» [PlayStation 3] In *Rayman Origins*' multiplayer you get 'bubblized' instead of dying and can be freed by other players.

» [Playstation 3] After two 3D *Rayman* outings, *Rayman Origins* returns to the 2D perspective of the original game.

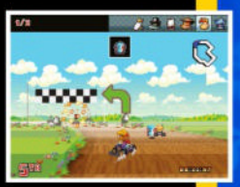
» [PlayStation 3] In keeping with its Nineties platformer feel, *Rayman Origins*' multiplayer is local and co-operative.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

RIVETING RELEASES

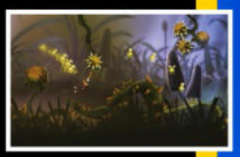
RAYMAN GOES KARTING, SHRINKS AND MEETS MARIO

RAYMAN KART



As well as Rayman, you can race as Globox, the Teensie King, a Rabbid and others. This mobile outing takes its lead from *Mario Kart*, but it references Rayman's world with power-ups such as tornados and boxing gloves. You unlock new races by winning Lums.

RAYMAN MINI



Part endless runner, part platformer, this Apple exclusive has Rayman, Barbara The Barbarian or Globox constantly moving but in the direction you choose. The '*Mini*' in its title refers to them being tiny so that the likes of plants and mushrooms look vast.

RAYMAN IN THE PHANTOM SHOW

A DLC release for the action RPG *Mario + Rabbids Sparks Of Hope*, *Phantom Show* allows Rayman some freedom of movement while exploring while not allowing him to jump. Combat is turn-based and requires strategy, and there are weapons and power-ups to collect.

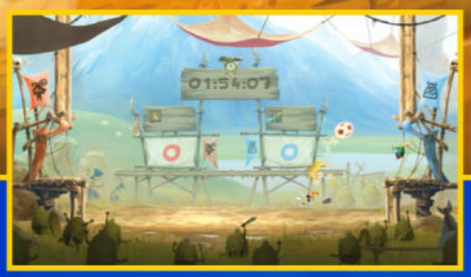
It's no exaggeration to say that *Rayman Origins* was viewed as a triumphant return to form for its limbless hero. Its sumptuous visuals, forgiving take on old-school platforming mechanics and couch co-op were all warmly welcomed. Rayman's latest outing had defied expectations much like the original, and so just two years later *Rayman Legends* continued in the same vein, and it brought a new player character called Barbara The Barbarian Princess with it. "The Wii U arrived, so we made another *Rayman* game for that using the touch-screen," Michel recollects. "I think when you make a multiplayer game you need superimportant to keep everyone involved in the game. The nice thing was that even a skilled player could be saved by a non-skilled player, so it was nice that everyone could have a role to play. Even players that were barely surviving could save a skilled player that had died, and then they were back into the game with their friend. So it was a nice dynamic."

characters that you can identify with very quickly. So we decided to bring back the kind of human-like character you had in *Rayman 2*, making them cartoon-like while also creating a connection for players who were not completely aware of the *Rayman* franchise. We had to not suddenly make things too realistic, but the match was OK, and she was a nice character. It was also a way to have a bit more contrast when you compared the different player characters. It's always fun to have a band of friends that are really different and not uniform, and to give choices for the players."

As well as introducing new characters, *Rayman Legends* also brought back some familiar faces, including Murphy The Greenbottle. But he was a playable sidekick in the 2D platformer instead of a guide as he had been in the earlier 3D games *Rayman 2* and *3*. His latest role was designed to make use of the Wii U's touch-screen, but it translated well to other popular consoles of the day. "It was really because of the Wii U version where Murphy was representing the touch-screen," Michel

» [PlayStation 3] In *Rayman Legends*, the hero's friend Murphy becomes a sidekick who performs tasks for him.

» [PlayStation 3] New playable character Barbara The Barbarian Princess makes her dramatic debut in *Rayman Legends*.



» [PlayStation 3] Rayman's telescopic fist returns in *Legends*, and it's just as effective as it was in the original.

says of Murphy's playable status. "One player used the touch-screen, and it was nice to give that a personality instead of it just being an interface. So we chose a character who was able to follow the movement of your finger, and that was where it came from. When you played *Rayman Legends* on consoles like the PlayStation 4 we transformed that into trigger actions because there wasn't a touch-screen, but it created something interesting for those consoles too. It was just a button triggering another character, but it was something that could be used more in platform games."

> "IT'S ALWAYS FUN TO HAVE A BAND OF FRIENDS THAT ARE REALLY DIFFERENT AND NOT UNIFORM, AND TO GIVE CHOICES FOR THE PLAYERS"
> **MICHEL ANCEL**

Returning to the platform game that helped launch the PlayStation, Michel has a balanced critique of the original *Rayman*. But above all he recognises its originality then and now, and how necessities forced on him by hardware that has long since been surpassed helped the novelty of his design. If further evidence of Rayman's enduring popularity is required, then surely this comes with the knowledge that his first outing is being rebooted. "I think *Rayman* is still a fun game, and there's a lot of content," Michel reviews. "The pacing is a bit slow because you have a big character on the screen. It also has pixel-precise gameplay, so it's not always easy, but it's interesting that the constraints of yesterday make it still feel original today. Even though it's complex I think there's a kind of remake planned. I don't remember when specifically, but it will be in HD and I think Ubisoft is adding a few more checkpoints and things like that just to make it a bit less frustrating. I think it's a nice move, because that's the only point that could be a problem for non-skilled players. But yeah, I think it's still a very nice game." ✱

Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend

IN THE KNOW

- **» DEVELOPER:** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
- **» COMPOSER:** TROELS BRUN FOLMANN
- **» BEST TRACK:** CROFT MANOR
- **» RELEASE:** 2006
- **» PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION 2, VARIOUS
- **» GENRE:** ADVENTURE

2026 MARKS A BANNER YEAR FOR THE TOMB RAIDER FRANCHISE, WITH THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT OF TWO NEW GAMES AND SERIES PROTAGONIST LARA CROFT SECURING TWO NEW GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS. THIS YEAR ALSO MARKS THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND, WINNING COMPOSER TROELS BRUN FOLMANN A BAFTA GAMES AWARD FOR HIS GLOBE-TROTTING SOUNDTRACK

WORDS BY LIAM HEITMANN-RYCE-LEMERCIER

The mid-Noughties saw a period of soft reboots across many long-running staples of popular culture. From the gritty course correction of *Batman Begins* in 2005, to a fresher-faced Bond in *Casino Royale*, this trend for reinvention also extended to the world of videogames.

Ten years after the first *Tomb Raider* title reshaped the modern videogame landscape, *Tomb Raider: Legend* saw the iconic action heroine emerge in the dawn of seventh-generation consoles. With the new hardware giving players more detailed environments than ever before, *Legend* was a high point for the franchise in its tenth anniversary year.

Danish composer Troels Brun Folmann is best known for his work across numerous titles in the *Tomb Raider* series, notably *Legend*, *Anniversary* and *Underworld*. Currently based in California, he is cofounder and CEO of 8Dio, a developer of virtual instruments for producers and composers.

> "I WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE ALREADY DONE WORK FOR THE CEO WHO, BACK THEN, RAN CRYSTAL DYNAMICS"
> TROELS BRUN FOLMANN

Fully immersing players in the game's many exotic locations – including Japan, Bolivia and Ghana – was the ambitious score by Danish composer Troels Brun Folmann. His involvement with the celebrated game series, however, came to pass in unexpected ways. "It was a great honour," he reflects today. "Back then, I was an aspiring PhD scholar – in AI and music systems, of all things. As a part of the PhD project, you had to do abroad studies. I was lucky enough to have already done work for the CEO who, back then, ran Crystal Dynamics."

It was this connection in the early Noughties that not only provided Troels with an important mentor ("We've been good friends for many years") but also the opportunity of a lifetime.

While Troels has penned music for other landmark franchises, including *Need For Speed* and *Transformers*, his work for the *Tomb Raider* series remains his most widely recognised. A quick scan of the comments section for these soundtracks on YouTube is clear proof of their staying power in the gaming community, and how affectionately they are remembered today.

"I've always written [those soundtracks] how I wanted them. I've never asked for anyone…" he ponders a moment then rephrases. "Whenever I work with someone, I'll always tell them that I'll do exactly what I'm told. If they don't like my first proposal, then I'm all ears. And I do that every single time: I allow myself to be free in the first iteration, and then I take feedback after that. And that's always worked for me."

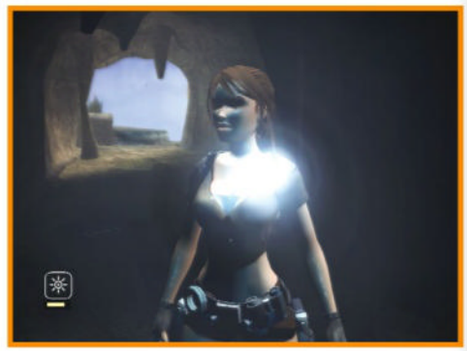
Troels' contribution to the sounds and atmosphere of the *Tomb Raider* universe was a major source of immersion for the player, with many of the instrument selections evoking the specific cultural fabric of each level's diverse settings.

Another important factor was the adaptive nature of the music, whereby tracks bled into one another as the player advanced throughout the map. The result was constant, almost subliminal sonic texturing that always enhanced the experience of the gameplay without drawing excess attention to itself.

» [PC] Lara performs a unique array of acrobatics with pistols drawn, differing from her non-combat moves.

» [PC] A new reimagining of Croft Manor borrows heavily from its depiction in the Angelina Jolie film adaptations.

» [PC] Collectible artefacts are scattered across the map of each level, encouraging the player to explore every nook and cranny.



» [PC] Lara explores dark caves for hidden treasures with the new addition of an ultra-bright flashlight.

What did draw attention to itself, however, were the exquisitely detailed settings. The graphical leaps demonstrated by the four *Tomb Raider* titles on which Troels served as composer, in particular, were a world beyond the boxy character models seen in the franchise's earlier PlayStation releases.

Notably, *Tomb Raider: Underworld* secured a Guinness World Record in 2010 for the most detailed in-game character model ever, featuring 32,816 individual polygons during real-time gameplay. "That was a big deal," Troels recalls of *Underworld*'s development. "It's weird for games, as you learn the different priorities – particularly for *Tomb Raider* – how much goes into the character design. You've got a significant amount of system resources going into the in-game world."

These allowances for graphical resources would occasionally intrude on other gameplay elements, to ensure that the system wouldn't overload while rendering so much information. "I remember, on several occasions, having to battle," Troels recalls of these software allowances. "We even had the discussion of whether there should be music or not in certain levels, because you're trying to squeeze as much as you can for the character."

The expansive soundscapes that Troels was able to produce for each of his *Tomb Raider* assignments got off to its strongest start with *Legend*, for which he won a BAFTA Games Award for Best Original Score. It's an accolade he looks back on today with mixed feelings. "The interesting thing about it is, that it sort of haunted me getting it," he says today. "Because all of a sudden, everyone started treating me differently. People that never responded, all of a sudden responded and all that. So I actually didn't like it! In the end, it was probably what made me go out of music in a weird way."

It was during his time on *Tomb Raider* that Troels designed his own digital instruments, as he wasn't happy with the suite of composing tools that were available for use at the time.

This is what led to where he is today, he tells us. "I have a couple of companies that make these, like, software-based instruments. So if I'm known for anything, it's probably more making new instruments than making game scores."

Though the man himself may feel otherwise, many fans of the *Tomb Raider* franchise continue to link Troels Brun Folmann to his evocative and unforgettable soundscapes, for what has become the world's best-selling videogame heroine.

That's right, in late 2025, Lara Croft landed herself yet another Guinness World Record – and it is an accolade that's perfectly timed for her 30th anniversary.

ANGEL OF DARKNESS AND WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

The PS2 game could have been quite different…

■ The *Tomb Raider* series underwent a soft reboot in 2006, following the lacklustre sales and middling critical reception of the previous 2003 entry *Angel Of Darkness*. A sudden shift in hardware, from the original PlayStation to the then-new PlayStation 2, caused a page-one redraft. According to *Tomb Raider* voice actress Jonell Elliot, it also meant a huge reduction in the game's planned narrative scope.

Speaking with us in 2021, she expressed her disappointment at the negative press surrounding the game "because so many talented people had been on board and so much hard work had been put into it. We all had so many expectations and were truly excited to see the outcome. Murti Schofield, the writer, delivered such an extraordinary script; it was truly mesmeric. As an actor, to work on a piece that was so cleverly written was an absolute privilege!"

» [PC] The new in-game character model offers a significant increase in graphical detail as compared with Lara's last outing, three years prior.

THE MAKING OF STAR WARS® KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC™ II THE SITH LORDS™

DESPITE BEING PLAGUED BY TECHNICAL ISSUES AND CUT CONTENT ON RELEASE, THE SEQUEL TO KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC REMAINS A WORTHY FOLLOW-UP TO BIOWARE'S ACCLAIMED GAME. CO-WRITER MICHAEL CHU EXPLAINS HOW IT ALL HAPPENED

WORDS BY GEM WHEELER

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
- **PLATFORM:** XBOX, PC
- **RELEASED:** 2004
- **GENRE:** RPG

2025 drew to a close with one of the year's most exciting gaming announcements. The Game Awards showcase brought us an intriguing trailer for *Star Wars: Fate Of The Old Republic*, a spiritual sequel to the two *Knights Of The Old Republic* (*KOTOR*) games to be developed by Casey Hudson for Arcanaut Studios. Given Hudson's pedigree as game director for BioWare's original *KOTOR* game there's a lot to look forward to.

It's been a chequered few years for the galaxy far, far away. The often exhausting discourse around the sequel trilogy still lingers, though *Star Wars* has made a mostly successful transition to the small screen with a varied roster of shows. *Andor*, which immersed us in the fractured politics of the New Republic before the events of *Rogue One*, confirmed that the franchise could handle dark, complex drama. *The Acolyte* – set in the dying days of the High Republic, a century before Anakin Skywalker's fall – delved into the history of the Jedi Order and the weaknesses that left it open to Sith infiltration.

For *KOTOR* fans, though, multilayered narratives of guilt and redemption are nothing new. The fate of Revan – hero, villain, legend – in the original 2003 game is still celebrated as a high point in *Star Wars* storytelling. As an RPG, *KOTOR* also delivers, with its crew of interesting characters, compelling dialogue and rich worldbuilding.

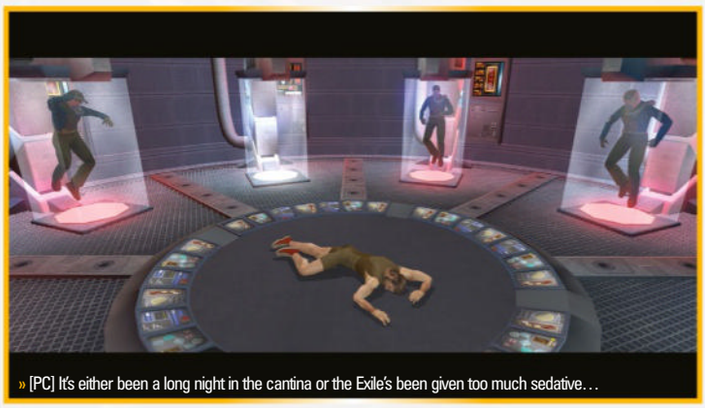
Its follow-up, *KOTOR II: The Sith Lords*, is a flawed masterpiece. Unique in its mature examination of the nature of good and evil, and released just as the big-screen prequel trilogy was drawing to a close, this was a whole new take on *Star Wars*. The game's rushed release in an incomplete state is a matter of huge regret, but – thanks to the dedicated fans who gave us *The Sith Lords Restored Content Mod* (*TSLRCM*) – we can now experience much of the cut content.

Our protagonist is the Exile, cast out from the Jedi Order as punishment for fighting alongside Revan in the Mandalorian Wars. The Exile's use of a horrific weapon during the infamous battle of Malachor V left a wound in the Force so terrible that their only option was to cut the ties binding them to that unifying, all-pervading energy. Following their escape from the doomed Peragus mining facility on Revan's old ship, the Ebon Hawk – accompanied only by cynical rogue Atton Rand, trusty droid T3-M4, and Kreia, a mysterious older woman with whom the Exile shares an inexplicable psychic bond – the Exile must confront the Jedi Masters and seek support in the conflict with the Sith. Dark agendas will be exposed and shocking truths revealed before a final fight harder than any they have ever experienced. As Kreia puts it, you are the battlefield: a galaxy's fate hangs on the resolution of your inner conflict. No pressure, then.

> "PULLING ALL THE WAY BACK, I THINK THE THING THAT WE MOST FOCUSED ON FOR KOTOR II WAS TO REALLY SHOW WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE FOR STAR WARS TO EXIST AS A LIVING, BREATHING WORLD"
>
> **MICHAEL CHU**

LucasArts wanted a *KOTOR* sequel fast, but the proposed 12-14-month timeframe didn't work for BioWare. Instead, it recommended that Obsidian Entertainment – a small team working in a cramped, makeshift office in Irvine, California – take up the baton. It was an offer too good to refuse. Development began in October 2003, with Chris Avellone as game director. Michael Chu, one of *KOTOR II*'s writers, shares his memories of those early days in what was for him a brand-new role.

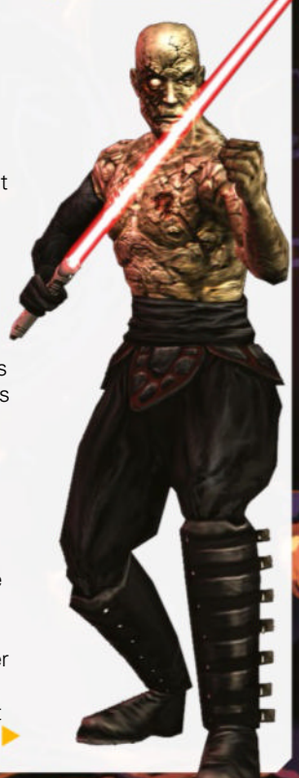
"It was an exciting time to be at Obsidian near the beginning. I missed the famous period in Feargus (Urquhart)'s attic, but it was hectic, in a good way. By the time I got there, it felt like there was a lot of pressure to hit the ground running, as there was so much game to make, and development was in full swing. All the designers sat in one office in the corner of the floor. It was a fun room to be in, with everyone in constant conversation about what they were working on."



» [PC] It's either been a long night in the cantina or the Exile's been given too much sedative…

» [Xbox] Enjoy a game of pazaak but just remember that the house usually wins.

» [Xbox] Give the Ebon Hawk's laser cannon a workout as you take on enemy vessels.



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC, PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360
RELEASED: 2010

PILLARS OF ETERNITY
PLATFORM: VARIOUS
RELEASED: 2015

THE OUTER WORLDS
PLATFORM: VARIOUS
RELEASED: 2019

■ Michael Chu was a writer on *Kotor II* and went on to work at Blizzard for 20 years. He is the cofounder and CEO of Treehouse Games.

» [PC] Don your spacesuit and get outside for a better view of the galaxy.

"BEING IN THE OLD REPUBLIC SETTING REALLY FREED US TO EXPLORE. WE DIDN'T FEEL THE GUARDRAILS OF BEING CLOSER TO THE MAIN ACTION OF THE MOVIES AND THE EU'S NEW REPUBLIC ERA"

MICHAEL CHU

Michael was in his element. "I was and am a huge *Star Wars* fan. When I was growing up, my most-watched VHS tape was *Star Wars*, recorded from TV, complete with C-3P0's advertisement. One of the reasons I was attracted to Obsidian in the first place was that I heard a rumour that they might be working on a new *KOTOR*, and I absolutely loved the first one.

"The first day I walked into the Obsidian offices and was shown around. Near the end, they took me to this very nondescript grey filing cabinet. Inside was every single published piece of work of the *Star Wars Expanded Universe* (EU) to date. I was told that I could use it to look up anything that I had questions about, but I – perhaps overconfidently – said that I wouldn't need to because, "I've read it all already." This was not an exaggeration: I had read every novel, comic and young adult novel that had been published at the time."

The tight schedule imposed by LucasArts had left Avellone and his team in a tricky position: they had to begin crafting a story even before the first game had been released. Avellone finally got to play through the original *KOTOR* and realised extensive redrafts would be necessary. Luckily, Michael managed to avoid this fraught-sounding period in the new title's development. "By the time I joined the project, I think they might have already figured out the necessary rewrites. One of the big challenges was to incorporate the many branching paths and possibilities introduced in the first game and carry them over to the second game, particularly in the characters that showed up in both."

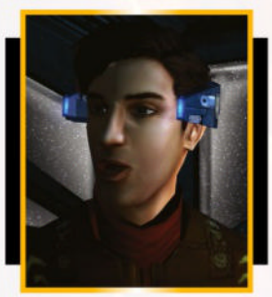
So how do you improve on a classic? Well, if it ain't broke… "We had to learn as we went. On the bright side, we had a strong foundation to build off of: the RPG gameplay of the first game was already very strong, so we just had to look for places where we could make the powers more useful, versatile or impactful. Also, the RPG mechanics of the d20 and Odyssey Engine were well established at the time, but I remember there were challenges with implementing them in some of the ways we were planning, like the massive branching dialogue and logic system behind all the companion dialogues in the Ebon Hawk. I spent many, many hours – probably days – in that one conversation file." The results speak for themselves: a familiar, yet pleasingly polished, engine underpinning the deep worldbuilding and engrossing dialogue we'd loved in the first game.

Not everything went to plan, of course. "There were other things that were surprising. We discovered late on that, due to technical constraints, we had over-decorated all the environments, which would require us to slice

STANDING WITH THE EXILE

KREIA

One of the most fascinating characters in *Star Wars*, Kreia (Sara Kestelman) will confound you to the very end. Her musings on the Force and the nature of good and evil, plus her powerful Force Bond with the Exile, make her your closest ally – and your ultimate foe.



ATTON RAND

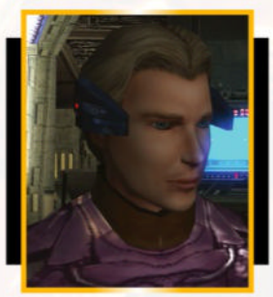
Atton (Nicky Katt) is what Han Solo pretends to be: a louche, amoral gambler focussed only on self-preservation, shielding his dark secrets with throwaway quips. The Exile will dig deep into the horrors of his past and change him, for better or for worse.

BAO-DUR

Still deeply loyal to the Exile, his general, Bao-Dur (Roger G Smith) harbours a terrible guilt for the pivotal role the weapon of mass destruction he created played in ending the Mandalorian Wars, leading to terrible loss of life on both sides.

MANDALORE

Returning character Canderous Ordo (John Cygan) is a changed man: gone is the jaded war veteran we met in the first *KOTOR*, and in his place is Mandalore The Preserver, a self-appointed custodian of the warrior society's customs with aggressive expansionist tendencies.

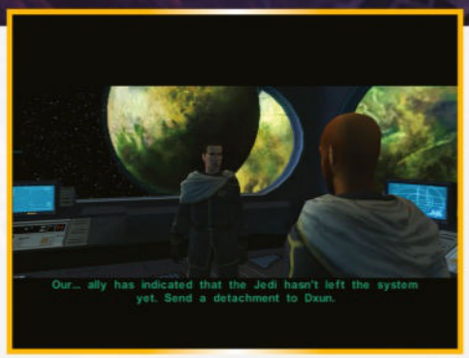


THE DISCIPLE

Gentle Jedi scholar Mical (Greg Ellis) harbours a courtly devotion to the female Exile and a deep suspicion that something is amiss, lurking just at the edge of his vision. (Kreia looks on, amused.) The spiteful taunts aimed at him by a jealous Atton bounce off him hilariously.

» [Xbox] Put your swoop racing skills to the test against the galaxy's finest and win prizes.

» [Xbox] Yes, the question of who exactly is the last Jedi has been asked before…



» [PC] Galactic politics is never less than a hive of scum and villainy…

the levels into additional pieces," says Michael. "This had the knock-on effect of us having to rewrite a lot of the game logic that was predicated on level boundaries being where they had been originally and caused a lot of new work. It also 'broke' a cutscene that I enjoyed on Telos where one of the Ithorians moonwalked out of the room. No one knew why the moonwalking happened, just that it disappeared and we could never get it back."

Michael emphasises that atmosphere and depth were paramount. "Pulling all the way back, I think the thing that we most focussed on for *KOTOR II* was to really show what it would look like for *Star Wars* to exist as a living, breathing world. In movies, the logic and worldbuilding only need to exist to serve the very brief glimpses we see of it in the various scenes. In a 40-plus-hour RPG, you need things to have a higher degree of verisimilitude."

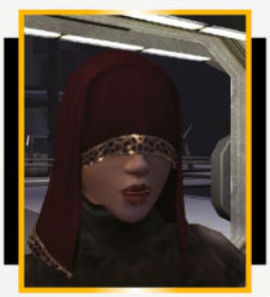
Both *KOTOR* games are set four millennia before the events of the *Star Wars* films, a distance in time that Michael and the team found liberating. "We wanted to dive straight into the idea of the nature of the Force; explore the philosophy of the Light and the Dark side; and really poke at the ideas of what the Jedi believed in, the end results of their philosophy, and how that would affect the Jedi themselves and the world around them. Being in the Old Republic setting really freed us to explore. We didn't feel the guardrails of being closer to the main action of the movies and the *EU*'s New Republic era.

"We also adopted a more character-focussed story, centring it on the relationship of the master and the apprentice: primarily through your relationship with Kreia but then echoed with your relationship with your companions, who you could influence in much the same way. We also wanted to fully explore the idea that your actions and influence could turn your companions to the Light or Dark side, and the idea that they had some agency in it."

» [PC] The Ebon Hawk, ready and waiting to be broken out of lockdown.

» [PC] Customise your Jedi to your satisfaction, but choose your skills and feats wisely.

MEET YOUR COMPANIONS ON THE EXILE'S DANGEROUS JOURNEY



VISAS MARR

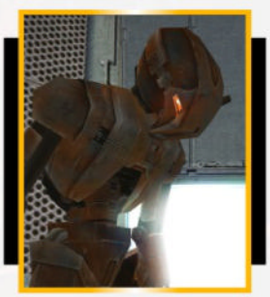
The graceful and enigmatic Visas (Kelly Hu) is the last survivor of the Miraluka, whose world was purged of life by her master, the all-consuming Darth Nihilus. Like all her people, Visas has no eyes but is able to see via the Force.

MIRA

Mira (Emily Berry) is a refugee turned bounty hunter, once enslaved by Mandalorians and now determined to forge her own path in a cold and hostile galaxy. Her sadistic Wookiee rival, Hanharr, is equally focussed on pursuing his contract on her to the bitter end…

THE HANDMAIDEN

Brianna (Grey DeLisle) stows away on the Ebon Hawk and reveals herself in the concealed Jedi Academy on Telos IV. She and her white-haired half-sisters all serve Atris, a former member of the Jedi Council with rigid ideas about the Order's purpose.



HK-47

HK-47 (Kristoffer Tabori) is so utterly devoid of goodness, scruple or empathy that you can't help but love him. That'll be our sentimental meatbag mentality talking, though. It's the Dark Side all the way for this droll assassin droid, back from the original *KOTOR* to kill again…

T3-M4

Thankfully, *Knights Of The Old Republic II* has its share of the cute and helpful droids more familiar in *Star Wars*. T3-M4 is always there to wade into battle with his lethal shock arm and will put himself in a tight spot (often literally) to save the Exile.

REBUILDING THE SITH

A FAN-MADE MOD RESTORED KOTOR II TO ITS FULL GLORY

As early as 2005, players calling themselves Team Gizka began the task of modding *KOTOR II* under the banner of *The Sith Lords Restoration Project*. Numerous bugs had marred the title on release, not to mention some cuts to gameplay which deprived the Exile's companions of satisfying resolutions to their character arcs. Team Gizka's work was eventually shelved, but Zbigniew 'zbyl2' Staniewicz and DarthStoney began a project of their own.

Released in beta in 2009 and completed to the team's satisfaction in July 2012, *The Sith Lords Restored Content Modification* (*TSLRCM*) is the result of determination and hard graft by unpaid modders whose passion for *KOTOR II* speaks volumes about the game's quality. Steam Workshop support since 2015 has meant that the mod is generally considered crucial in order to experience the game as intended, though dissenters feel that some of the cut material was pruned for good reason. Aspyr Media is responsible for supporting *KOTOR II* on current platforms, but Xbox still lacks integration, while the mod's inclusion as DLC for the 2022 Nintendo Switch port never materialised for legal reasons (Aspyr couldn't provide Disney with names for the 22 people behind the mod).

The accompanying *M4-78 Enhancement Project* restored an entire cut planet where the oddly charming assassin droid HK-47 gets the opportunity to wreak vengeance on a factory's worth of upstart HK-50 models. New content, including voice acting, was needed for some areas where the code didn't come up with the goods. Other restored elements – including a duel between Atton Rand and Darth Sion that could end poignantly for a female Exile loved by the wisecracking former murderer – drew from the original code. It's a real treat for fans keen to savour more of the dialogue and depth that keeps drawing us back to *KOTOR II*.

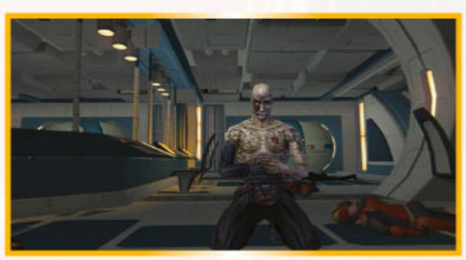
» [PC] Combat in *KOTOR II* is fast-paced, fluid and elegantly animated.

» [Xbox] Korriban is a forbidding world rich in dark, ominous Sith history that's better forgotten.

Michael's thrilled to see that this fascination with what separates Light from Dark has persisted into the current canon. "I read recently that Leslye Headland name-dropped *KOTOR II* and Darth Traya as an influence on *The Acolyte*, and I feel like I can see a little line of connection between our story and that one. On that note, I absolutely loved *The Acolyte*, and I really feel like it explores in a meaningful and interesting way some of the themes we were diving into in *KOTOR II*."

One familiar face (well, voice: now reimmersed in Mandalorian culture, he's never seen without his helmet) is that of Mandalore The Preserver: Canderous Ordo, the enemy-turned-ally Revan won to their cause. Michael had the interesting challenge of writing dialogue for this returning character, who's evolved significantly since we last met him. "Personally, I think one of the great things about being able to revisit a character is to meet them on another point on their timeline and see how they're different (or not different) or how what we know of them is tested and challenged in a new setting. *KOTOR II* gave the opportunity to do this with Mandalore. One of the hardest parts of picking up a character someone else wrote is trying to get the specific mannerisms and voice of the character."

Michael also wrote for Bao-Dur, the enigmatic Zabrak engineer responsible for the Mass Shadow Generator used to genocidal effect at Malachor V. "In terms of Bao-Dur, I inherited the character after Dave Maldonado moved on to other projects, and as a *Star Wars* fan, I was so excited to work on a character that shared some background with Darth Maul, who had absolutely vaulted out of the screen and into my imagination in *The Phantom Menace*. Especially since it was possible that Bao-Dur could become a Jedi,



» [PC] Darth Sion is barely held together by the Force and his sheer hatred of Kreia.

» [Xbox] Pull off some acrobatic moves as you master the fine art of lightsaber combat.

I wanted to avoid making him too Darth Maul-like but retain just a little bit of that stoicism. The idea of an almost zen, contemplative engineer also appealed to me, especially given the tragic events of his past. Bao-Dur also has his shared history with the Exile, and it was really exciting to be able to reveal both of their histories through that companion relationship. Fun fact: we originally wanted Bao-Dur's Sith appearance to be closer to Darth Maul's, but I think (reasonably) there was pushback about making him too close to him. The art was amazing though."

> "I FEEL LIKE KOTOR II STILL HAS A FOND PLACE IN THE HEARTS OF STAR WARS FANS, EVEN IF IT WAS A LITTLE ROCKY AT LAUNCH"
>
> **MICHAEL CHU**

The savage cuts made to *KOTOR II* in order to meet its release date still rankle with Michael, but he's drawn consolation from the effort put into the fan-made mod. "I haven't played the *Sith Lords Restored Content* mod, but I would like to someday," he says. "I think it's very flattering that people were interested in the story of *KOTOR II* enough to the point that they would go to all this effort to restore the work and try to make it functional. We always felt it was a big shame. All of the dialogue had been written and recorded, a lot of it was even functional, but we had to get the game out of the door."

Following the sale to Disney, *KOTOR* inhabits the same interesting no-man's-land of non-canonical material as the rest of the old *EU*. "On reflection, now that the game itself is considered Legends (and I can get too excited every time there is even the smallest reference to it in the new canon), I think the existence of the restored content is even better, because really it all exists on the same level of canon now. I hope that people who had questions that were unanswered in the game have at least taken a peek into the mod and seen some of the goodies we left on the cutting-room floor."

A planned third game was abandoned by LucasArts in favour of the MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic*: a safer bet following a move towards multiplayer and the shadow left on the franchise by the prequels' mixed reception. Michael's satisfied with both *KOTOR II*'s legacy and its continuing relevance as a pointer towards *Star Wars*' future, with so much nuance and complexity left to explore as the franchise approaches its sixth decade. "I feel like *KOTOR II* still has a fond place in the hearts of *Star Wars* fans, even if it was a little rocky at launch. We all loved *Star Wars* and just wanted to really dig in and examine its themes, values, the Force, the Jedi, all of it. I still believe that a deep exploration of the Jedi Order has storytelling value, as we can see in modern *Star Wars* stories like *The Acolyte* and *The Last Jedi*. But most of all, as a longtime fan, I still feel so honoured and lucky that I got a chance to play in the galaxy far, far away."

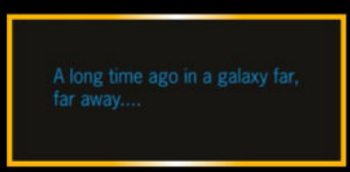
HEIR TO THE MAESTRO

MARK GRISKEY'S SCORE RANKS AMONG STAR WARS' FINEST

LucasArts' in-house composer, Mark Griskey, was handed the task of creating an orchestral soundtrack worthy of a franchise renowned for the thrilling work of the legendary John Williams, whose unforgettable themes instantly evoke epic space battles, fateful duels, and bittersweet romance. Griskey was more than up to the challenge. Performed by the Sinfonia Orchestra in Seattle, *KOTOR II*'s theme is simply incredible; the spine-chilling theme for Darth Nihilus is a particular highlight. His music achieves the impossible, matching Williams note for note in grandeur, mystery and menace while crafting an identity all of its own: a fresh path for a new take on *Star Wars* that nonetheless honoured what had come before.

Michael heaps praise on Griskey's work. "One of the greatest things about working on a *Star Wars* project is to get a *Star Wars* soundtrack, and Mark Griskey's soundtrack for *KOTOR II* was stellar. I remember the great joy we had any time new tracks came in and in turn provided additional inspiration for the writing and story of the game."

Griskey left LucasArts in March 2005 to go freelance. He's since composed the score for 2007's *The Force Unleashed* and the MMO, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.



God Hand

"MY STYLE IS IMPETUOUS!"

» **PLAYSTATION 2** » **2006**
» **CLOVER STUDIO**

I reviewed *God Hand* when I was working on *Play,* and loved it so much that I think I gave it 90 out of 100. However, just as the production editor was about to finish checking the pages, I realised I was being a complete fanboy and had him knock it down to 86. The reason being that I didn't think many other people would enjoy it as much as I did. The lacklustre sales of *God Hand* made that evident, as did the utterly atrocious and infamous IGN review that gave *God Hand* three out of ten…

Anyway, I reviewed it, kept the review code that I could play on my chipped PS2, and went on to complete it five times (two of them on Hard and one doing the Kick Me Sign challenge). It's one of my proudest gaming achievements – so much so that I used the save screen as my Facebook header image, and I've never changed it since.

There's so much that makes *God Hand* so good and so unique. Mainly the combat, but it's all bolstered by humour, incredible music (it's one of the only videogame soundtracks I own) and a general sense of wackiness that I came to adore. You're able to create your own combos from a massive list of moves, and it's great fun trying them all out to find a set that works for you. And while comboing, juggling and smashing enemies against walls, you're being tested by the variable difficulty system – play well and it all gets more difficult, get wrecked and it gets a bit easier.

Then you've got all the characters, the enemies and the bosses to wail on. Sure the tank controls take a bit of getting used to, but once it clicks you've played one of the greatest 3D fighters of all time. Unfortunately the bad sales ended Clover Studio (*Viewtiful Joe*, *Okami*), and Gene never got to appear in *Super Smash Bros* even though many fans requested it.

400G

RETRORATED

>> This month sees us blasting through new shmup Birdcage, delving into System 3's The Last Ninja Collection and take a spiritual successor to Crazy Taxi for a ride. We also find time to read through the latest offering from Bitmap Books

» [PC] Before you shoot the core, you'll first have to reach it.

Birdcage

A SHMUP YOU'LL WANT TO TREASURE

INFORMATION

- **SYSTEM:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** NA
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PUBLISHER:** POLYGON BIRD
- **DEVELOPER:** POLYGON BIRD
- **PLAYERS:** 1

From the moment *Birdcage*'s opening begins with its rousing, thundering score and distinctive art style, it's obvious that Treasure's *Radiant Silvergun* was a big inspiration to the small team that made it. Narrative based, with a neat sword mechanic and a stylish anime look, it's a remarkable effort from a small two-man team that proves there's still plenty of interesting ideas left to explore within the genre.

In BE 2343, mankind split into two factions. SELENE controls what remains of Earth and its satellite, the moon, while RADON controls the space colony known as the Cage and is overseen by the ruthless Mother Roentgen and her military group known as RADON Daughters. RADON aims to destroy the Earth with a new weapon known as The World-Egg, but when a lone pilot awakens deep inside the Cage in an experimental RADON gunship RADON's plans take a dramatic turn.

The most notable nod to Treasure's *Radiant Silvergun* is the laser sword that your craft comes equipped with. While it can be used to destroy nearby enemies and bullets of the same colour, it can also be rotated with the second analogue stick and be fired off towards anything that it's locked onto. It's an incredibly neat mechanic that rewards high use as the points you get from destroying enemies with it are far more than when you use your standard firepower.

In the tradition of many similar games, there are two alternate types of fire on offer, one gives a wide spread that will reach most

» [PC] *Birdcage* is filled with neat ideas. One stage sees you flying through a blackout for a short amount of time, while this one sees you submerged underwater.

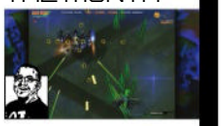
BRIEF HISTORY

» *Birdcage* marks the debut of POLYGON BIRD Games, which consists of Barry Topping and Giannis Milonogiannis. Inspired by the shoot-'em-ups of the Nineties, it's an intense, fast-paced vertical shmup with a distinct visual art style and 45 minutes of sensational music.

» [PC] Unleashing Hyperblade Mode will see most bullets turning into handy medals.

» [PC] *Birdcage*'s cutscenes do a good job of setting up the game's story and the challenges you'll face.

★PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN

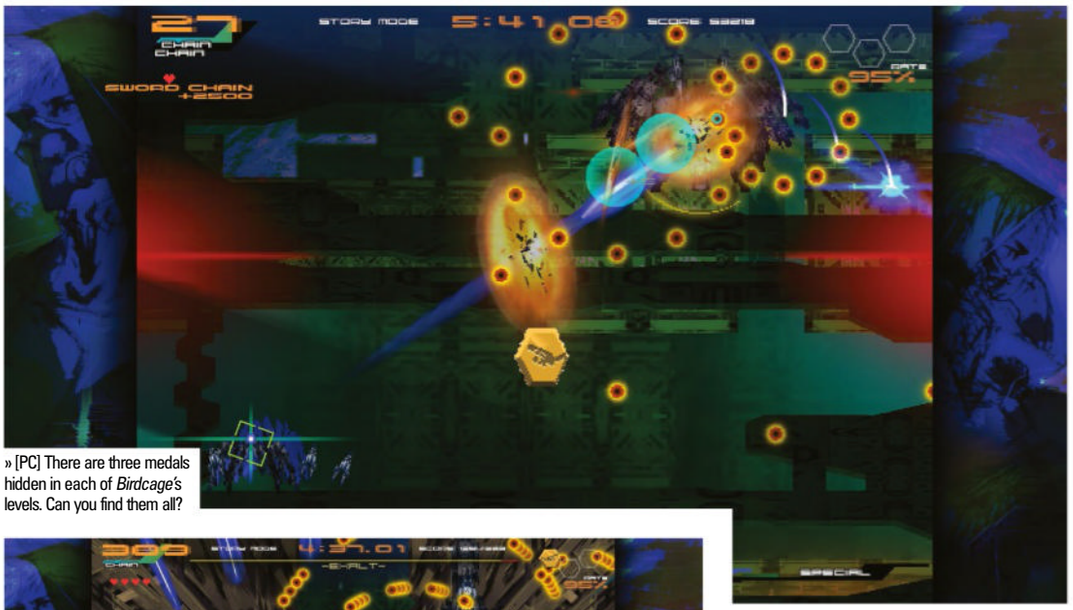
Birdcage

Yes the difficulty needs a little tweaking, but it remains an immensely playable shmup and I love its Score Attack mode.

TIM

Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth

I bought this just before Christmas and have only recently finished it. Even then I didn't want it to end. I really hope this isn't the last we see of Ichiban Kasuga.



» [PC] There are three medals hidden in each of *Birdcage*'s levels. Can you find them all?

» [PC] Even with your tiny hitbox, you'll often struggle to find your way through boss bullet patterns when you first encounter them.

enemies, but deal less damage, while the other offers concentrated firepower but greatly reduces your movement, (although this becomes very handy once you start weaving through some of the denser bullet patterns introduced later in the game.)

Lastly, your prototype craft has access to Hyperblade Mode, an attack similar to a smart bomb that delivers tremendous amounts of damage for a limited amount of time, but needs to be significantly recharged before you can use it again. It's a useful weapon to have as RADON's forces are relentless and come at you in a number of challenging waves.

With all the on-screen carnage happening, it's inevitable that you'll eventually get hit by a stray bullet. Fortunately, *Birdcage* employs a health bar system, with a slice of it disappearing with every hit you take. Lose all three bars and you'll forfeit a life.

The easiest mode of the game introduces a recharging shield, but it sadly makes things far too easy. In addition to its health bar system, *Birdcage* presents you with an interesting choice whenever you defeat a mid-level boss. As the mayor plummets Earthwards you're presented with three options: you can nab an extra life, refill up your existing health bar or net some extra bonus points. It's a surprisingly flexible system, allowing you to adapt your play depending on how your run is going.

There are three different play modes available in *Birdcage*. Story uses cutscenes and pilot interactions to tell the game's story, while Arcade does away with the plot in favour of all out blasting. Finally, Score Attack does exactly what it says, giving you a limited amount of time to destroy as many of RADON's forces as possible.

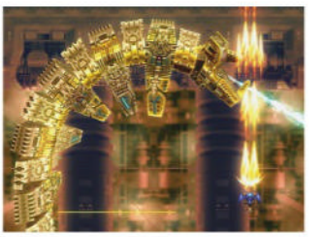
Additionally, there's a useful training and tutorial section, while Dryad Memory is where you'll find online leaderboards and the ability to unlock extras like bios and screen borders, using the credits you acquire during play. It's not the most packed of games, but it remains impressive, considering the small team behind it.

That impressiveness extends to the game's distinctive aesthetic style too. It's possible you'll find yourself turning off the fake scanline presentation it initially offers, but the game itself looks great with striking, often chunky visuals that once again call to mind the rough beauty of *Radiant Silvergun*. *Birdcage*'s score is exceptional too, with a fierce, high-tempo soundtrack that perfectly matches the intense ferocity of RADON's forces.

Boss fights are another highlight of the game, with some inventive-looking mayors to tackle and some challenging bullet patterns to navigate (particularly on Normal mode, when a second colour of bullets is introduced).

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
RADIANT SILVERGUN (SATURN)



▼ SOMETHING NEW
R-TYPE FINAL 2 (PC)

It all makes for a genuinely satisfying shooter.

It's a pity then that the game itself feels so unbalanced. We found Easy mode to be just that, completing all stages of the game on our second attempt. On the other hand, Normal feels frustratingly difficult at times with immense difficulty spikes that take ages to push through. With a little more balancing this could have been something truly special, but as it stands it's a very enjoyable shmup that fans of the genre should definitely seek out. ✱

In a nutshell

The game's difficulty is all over the place, but it's filled with neat ideas and mechanics and has a truly fantastic soundtrack. We'd love to see a sequel as the universe itself is so interesting.

>> Score **83%**

» [PC] Score Attack reminds us of the intense Caravan Modes of old, but with added online leaderboards.

The Last Ninja Collection + BONUS GAMES

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** SWITCH
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £24.99
- **PUBLISHER:** SYSTEM 3
- **DEVELOPER:** SYSTEM 3
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

STREET FIGHTER COLLECTION (PLAYSTATION)

▼ SOMETHING NEW

MORTAL KOMBAT: LEGACY KOLLECTION (PC)

BRIEF HISTORY

» *The Last Ninja* debuted in 1987 on the Commodore 64 and instantly found acclaim thanks to its distinctive setting, great visuals and engaging game mechanics. Two sequels and two updates quickly followed, with *Last Ninja 3* being the last game in the series. While several attempts were planned to revitalise the series in later years, they never panned out.

GO DEEPER

The facts behind The Last Ninja Collection + Bonus Games

» A playable demo of both *IK++* and *Last Ninja 4* were available to Kickstarter backers who chose the PC Diamond Ultimate Supporter tier.

» *Ninja Remix* is different to *Last Ninja Remix*, being an Amiga and Atari ST update of the original game, and not an update of *Last Ninja 2*.

» Sadly, *Ninja Remix* isn't included on the compilation. Neither are conversions of various *Last Ninja* games for systems like the Amstrad CPC, BBC Micro, PC and Apple II.

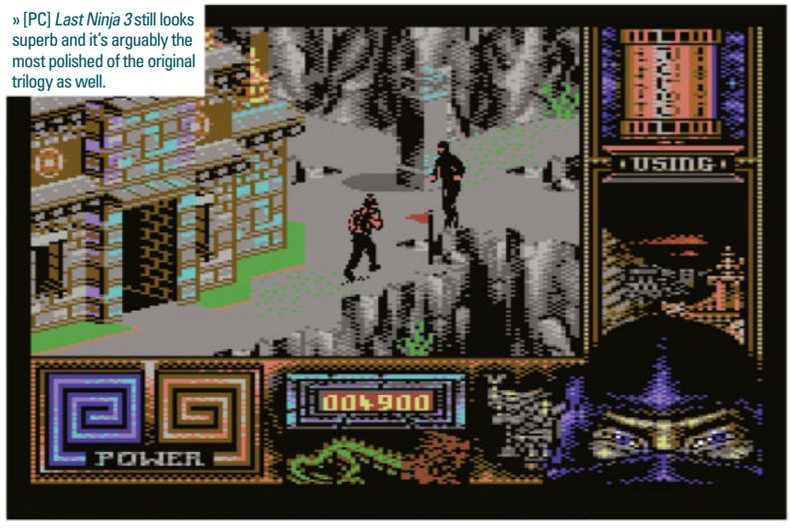
After finding a huge amount of success on Kickstarter, System 3's *The Last Ninja Collection + Bonus Games* has now been unleashed on PC, but does it still pack a punch?

Well the good news is that virtually all the included games hold up very well indeed, and we've sunk a large amount of time into each game, particularly the brilliant *Last Ninja 2* and Archer Maclean's excellent *IK+*.

The collection itself consists of *The Last Ninja*, *Last Ninja 2: Back With A Vengeance*, *Last Ninja 3* and *Ninja Remix*, which is essentially a tweaked update of *Last Ninja 2* with a remixed soundtrack, a short intro and numerous tweaks. The rest of the collection continues the fighting theme and features *Bangkok Knights*, *International Karate* and *IK+*.

We'd say that most of the games hold up well, with the highlights being the core *Last Ninja* trilogy and *IK+*. *Bangkok Knights* is arguably the weakest game to be included and feels very clunky to play today, while *International Karate* is a solid-enough one-on-one fighter but feels redundant due to Maclean's superior sequel.

One particularly nice touch that has been included is that several of the games have alternate versions outside of the C64 originals. You can play the Amiga versions of *Last Ninja 2*, *Last Ninja Remix* and *IK+*, while ZX Spectrum versions of *Last Ninja 2*, *International Karate* and *IK+* are also available. It's a pity that versions from other systems didn't make the cut, but it's pleasing to see these alternate options, especially the Amiga editions that do a great job of improving the visual atmosphere of the *Last Ninja* series, which was already impressive-looking in its 8-bit incarnation.



» [PC] *Last Ninja 3* still looks superb and it's arguably the most polished of the original trilogy as well.

Presentation throughout is solid rather than exceptional and you're treated to a nice splash screen of each game which features various accolades it received back in the day, as well as instructions on how to play and an overview of each game's controls. This section is also where you can choose between different versions (if they're available). Once you're in the game you have a single save option for each individual game and a variety of filters, including a CRT effect and an Old-School option that adds curvature and distortion, although we'd imagine most will stick with the Pixel Perfect option.

In terms of emulation, the quality across all three included systems is very good and we've noticed no weird graphical or sound issues. John Twiddy, a longtime System 3 collaborator, has been working on this project behind the scenes, so it makes sense that the compilation includes some good software quality control.

» [PC] It's great to see multiple versions of the games being included. We've rarely played the Amiga *Last Ninjas*.

Unfortunately, the thing that lets *The Last Ninja Collection* down is that it's so barebones. There's a fascinating history behind the *Last Ninja* series, and to a lesser extent the *International Karate* series, but you won't find anything about lost games included here. That's been saved for the incoming Kickstarter releases and while that makes perfect sense, it does mean that this current version doesn't offer the same amount of value as projects by studios such as Digital Eclipse.

» [PC] *IK+* remains a stone-cold classic. We lost way too many hours to this one again.

» [PC] This crazy Old-School filter will be too much for some, but it does look rather groovy.

In A Nutshell

A solid selection of games with great emulation and multiple versions, but it's let down by a lack of extras and very similar games.

>> **Score 78%**

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PICK OF THE MONTH

Picross S SNK Classics & NeoGeo Edition

» **System:** Switch, Switch 2 » **Buy it for:** £16.19 » **Buy it from:** Online

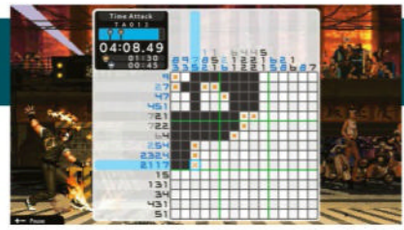
If you've ever played one of Jupiter's previous *Picross S* games, you'll know exactly what to expect with its newest release – clever puzzles combined with iconic videogame characters. *SNK Classics* is no different, featuring puzzles inspired by 50 different games from SNK's vast library. If you ever wanted to meticulously piece together Terry Bogard's iconic hat or the visage of Geese Howard, this is your chance to do so.

The puzzles themselves are as well designed as anything from previous Jupiter outings and there are a good range of game modes on offer. Picross offers 150 puzzles to tackle, Mega Picross ups the difficulty with more complex puzzles, while Color Picross ramps the challenge up even higher as the blocks of different colours aren't necessarily separated by empty squares. That leaves Clip Picross which features huge puzzles made up of many smaller ones.

New to the series is Time Attack which is an exceptionally tough mode due to it stealing 12 seconds from you every time you make a mistake. In a nice touch, classic characters are featured in the puzzle's border and will take damage whenever you make a mistake. Outside of Time Attack the only other additions to the long-running series are a small art gallery and the option of using grid guidelines, should you wish to share content via social media.

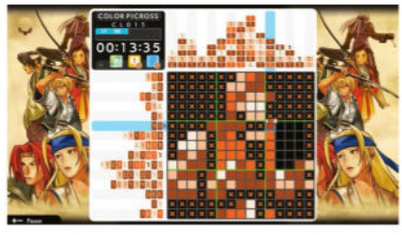
While it could be argued that the *Picross S* series is beginning to become a little formulaic in the structure of what it offers, there's no denying the quality of the puzzles, or the satisfaction you get from solving them.

>> **Score 80%**



» [Switch] Time Attack is absolutely brutal and you'll hate yourself for making silly mistakes.

» [Switch] Clip Picross returns and it remains one of our favourite game modes.



Taxi Chaos 2

» **System:** PC (tested), PlayStation 5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox Series X » **Buy it for:** £20.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

It's a brave developer that takes on Sega's *Crazy Taxi*, and while this sequel offers some nice ideas, it ultimately falls short. There's an Arcade mode where you nip around a huge city, picking up and dropping off customers, while the Story mode expands on this by pitting you against a rival firm and its automated cabs. Additionally, you'll need to complete various missions to enhance your progress and you can buy faster cabs and even upgrade them and research new parts. Sadly, it all feels very grindy to play. Slippery handling, annoying, repeated voiceovers and performance issues don't help either, so you're probably better off waiting for the next ride to come along.

DARRAN JONES

>> **Score 51%**

Trigger Happy: A Visual Celebration Of Video Game Controllers

» **Buy it for:** £32.49 » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

Bitmap Books has been knocking it out of the park recently, and its latest release is another essential read. While *Trigger Happy* doesn't include any interviews from the creators of the many peripherals that are covered, it does deliver sumptuous photography and interesting insight into the numerous sticks and pads on offer. Both console and computer sticks are covered in their own sections chronologically, neatly explaining how these devices have evolved over the years. While there are a few quotes and anecdotes from industry insiders, it's the input from author Christian Wenk that really holds this tome together. All in all, it's a lovely read.

DARRAN JONES

Tomba! 2: The Evil Swine Return Special Edition

» **System:** PC (tested), PlayStation 5, Switch, Switch 2 » **Buy it for:** £15.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

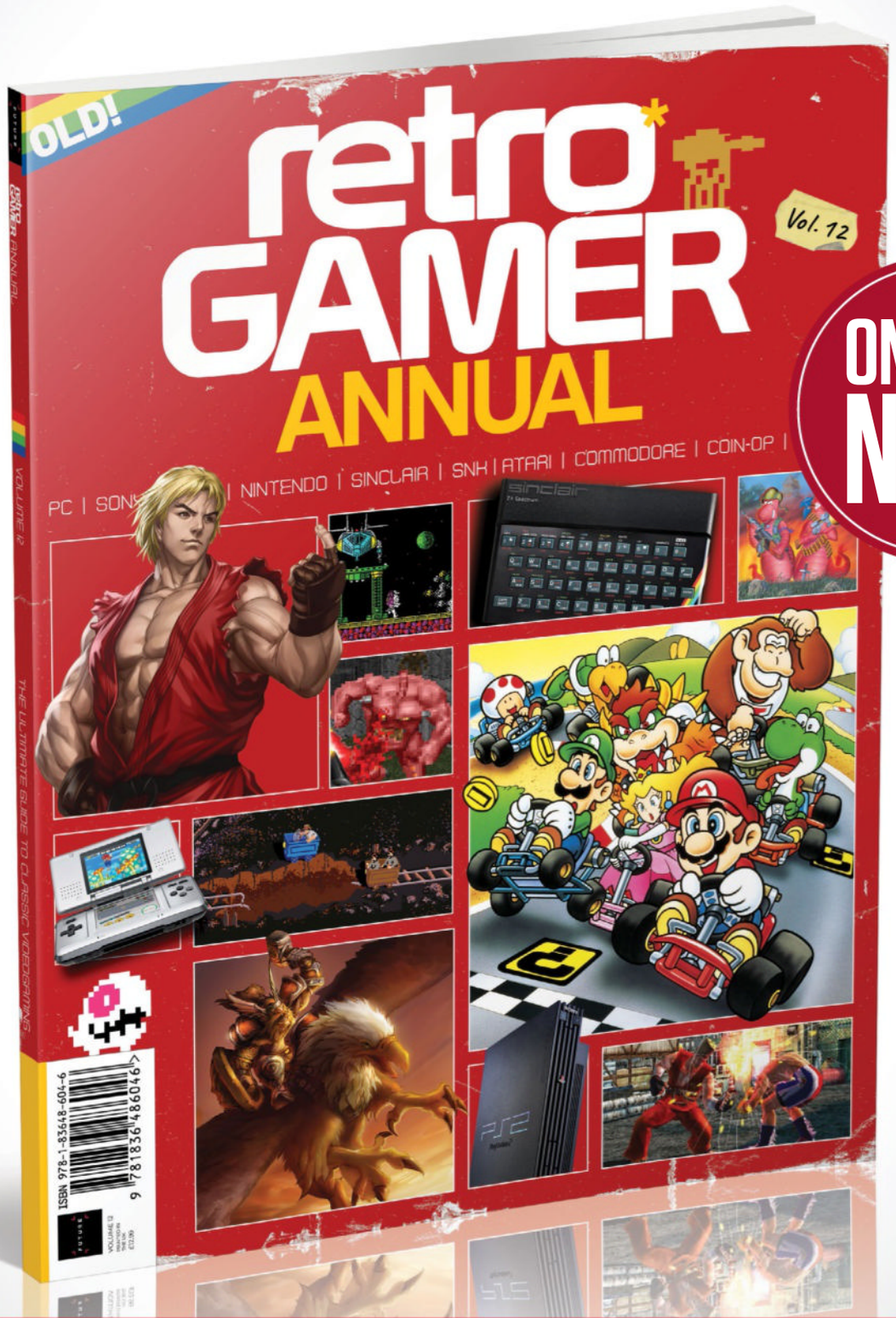
The sequel to *Tomba!* was always an ambitious, but flawed Metroidvania and time has done nothing to change that. There's no denying that the 2.5d platforming is enjoyable, but it doesn't feel as polished as the original and some of the jumping and movement is quite irksome. The sheer amount of quests found in *Tomba! 2* is also a little much as it's not always clear how they need to be achieved, so you'll end up doing a lot of needless backtracking. Limited Run Games has done the best to modernise the game with save states, a rewind feature and other quality-of-life extras, and there's some nice bonus options to explore too, but its first *Tomba!* remaster is a far better game.

DARRAN JONES

>> **Score 70%**

CELEBRATE THE BEST OF RETRO GAMING IN 2025

Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!



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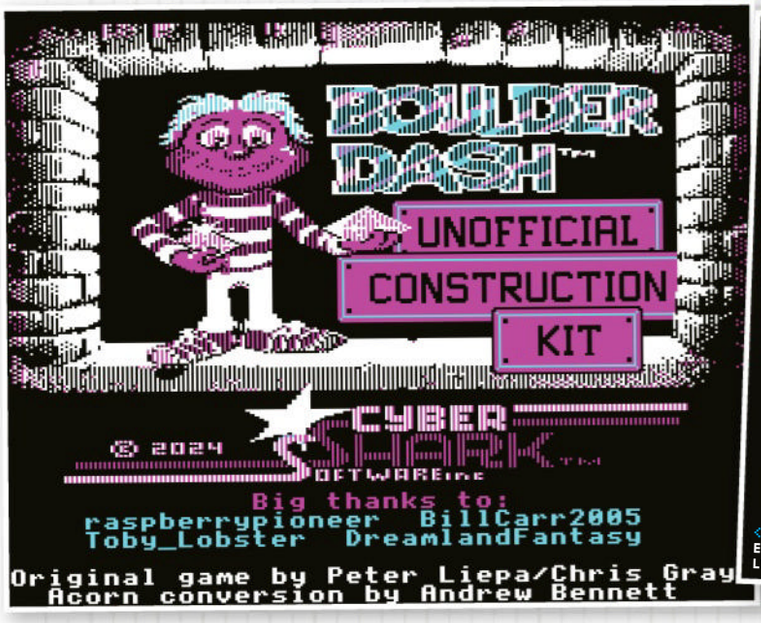
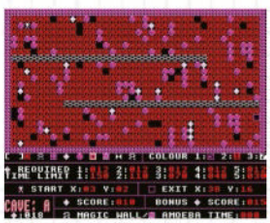
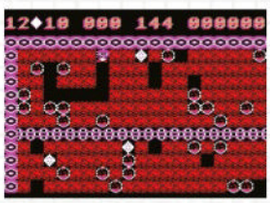


<!--- [BBC MICRO] BLAST ALL THE ENEMIES TO ADVANCE TO THE NEXT LEVEL IN ORION PATROL. --->

<!--- [BBC MICRO] ESCAPE THE MAZE AND SAVE HUMANITY IN EPSILON PROTOCOL. --->

<INTRO> FOR ALL THE MEGA DRIVE/GENESIS CREATORS OUT THERE, THE HOMEBREW FACTORY (HOMEBREW-FACTORY.COM) NOW ALLOWS YOU TO CONFIGURE AND CUSTOMISE YOUR CARTRIDGE AND PACKAGING – EITHER AS A PREORDER CAMPAIGN OR FOR YOUR OWN KICKSTARTER. AND CHECK OUT ITS NEW GAME BOY COLOR PHYSICAL RELEASE, KERO KERO COWBOY, AT BIT.LY/KEROKERO-GBC OUR MAIN FEATURE FOCUSSES ON THE BBC MICRO, THE CHAMPION CODER HAS BEEN WORKING ON MEGA DRIVE GAMES, AND REVIEWS INCLUDE THE RECENT SONIC GX. ENJOY! </INTRO>





<!--- [BBC MICRO] THE NEW BOULDER DASH WITH BUBBLE BOBBLE-INSPIRED SPRITES. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

BBC BRILLIANCE

<INTRO> THE BBC MICRO RECENTLY CELEBRATED ITS 44TH BIRTHDAY, AND TALENTED PROGRAMMERS ARE CONTINUING TO PUSH THE HARDWARE WITH NEW GAMES </INTRO>

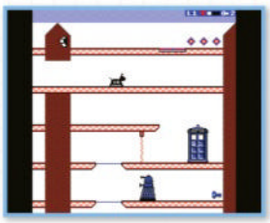
<BODY> ***Orion Patrol*** **from Angus Hughes (scoring 83% in RG 281) was inspired by the Archimedes 3D classic, *Zarch*.** "It would be far too time-consuming to plot a solid landscape as *Zarch* does, but this slimmed-down approach seems to work," says Angus. "It was my first attempt at 3D; after using tables to speed things up, there were far fewer multiplications needed than I expected. I modelled the main ship in Blender and converted it into 84 separate frames. Other elements are pre-defined sprites that have six possible sizes."

Angus codes with the B2 emulator/debugger, BeebASM assembler, and Sublime Text. "For graphics, I start with graph paper, then a customised Excel spreadsheet as my sprite editor with cell shapes adjusted to the BBC's graphics modes," we're told. "From there, I generate the actual bytes for each graphic." For his next project, Angus says, "I'm keen to adapt the landscape engine into a 3D isometric fully scrolling game as a follow-up to an unreleased game I wrote in 1988 called *Dragon Quest*."

Another impressive effort is Chris Bradburne's *Epsilon Protocol*. "The 3D effect is a ray-casting engine with lots of look-up tables," says Chris. "I prototyped the renderer in BBC BASIC for SDL, then coded using VSCode and BeebASM. A small Python script combines the level files, and a PowerShell script builds the game. Each room derives from a single 16-bit seed. I created a program that drew all 65,535 possible rooms and selected ones that were 'interesting' to put together in a map for each level."

The Stardot forums (stardot.org.uk/forums) feature threads following new developments. This includes the forthcoming *BurgerTime* conversion by PhilHP, resurrecting his unfinished 1985 project. Another thread created a new compendium version of *Boulder*

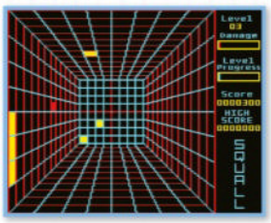
ACORN ACTION



AN ADVENTURE IN TIME

Mark John Lecce

<Control a robot dog, zap annoying robots and find hidden keys, as you try to reach a familiar-looking blue police box… />



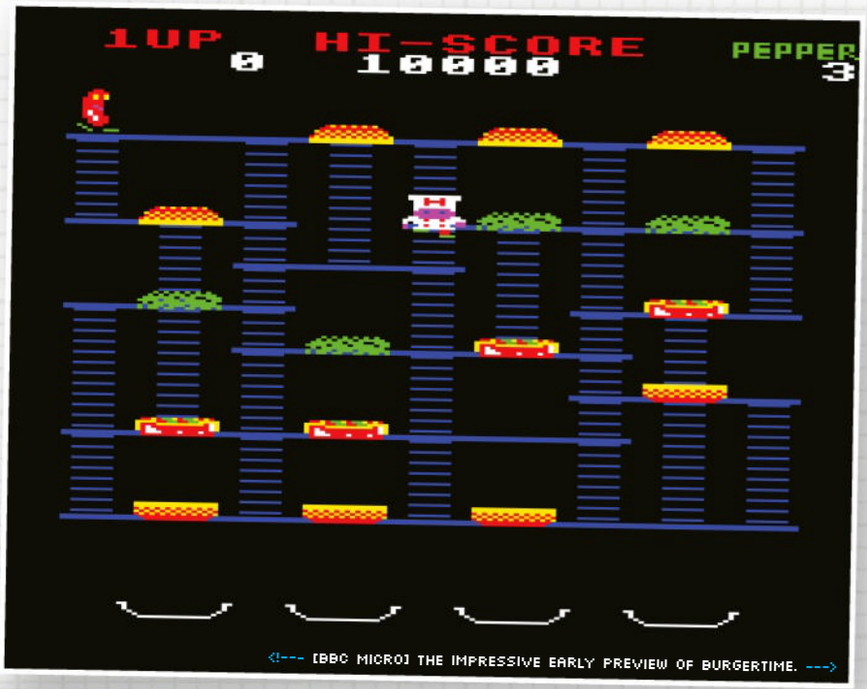
OMNITRIS/SQUALL

Alec Barker

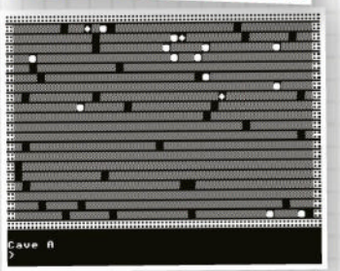
<Alec's excellent conversion of *Welltris* where the pieces 'fall' into the screen was repurposed as the *Tempest*-style shooter *Squall*. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**



<!--- [BBC MICRO] THE IMPRESSIVE EARLY PREVIEW OF BURGERTIME. --->



<!--- [BBC MICRO] AN EARLY EFFORT IN UNDERSTANDING THE BOULDER DASH LEVEL DATA. --->

Dash – bit.ly/boulderdash-bbc Stephen Williams (raspberrypioneer) inspired the development, with help from ToyLobster's disassembly. "Bill Carr cracked how the caves were built and enabled them to be loaded from files instead," explains Stephen. "Bill's work paved the way for the cave editors, of which his runs in Windows (written in BBC BASIC), and Cybershark's editor runs on BBC/Electron."

Cybershark also contributed a sprite editor, putting all the new graphics and levels into a compilation disk. "I merged cave files so that all games could be played from a single SSD file, which is better for my Electron," says Stephen. "I added the pseudo-random mechanism for plotting elements (boulders, diamonds, etc) per the original Peter Liepa version. This meant that loaded caves could behave the same way as the original across the five skill levels, and new fan caves could be created. I also added bombs and zero gravity to a new version." Stephen then went on to create new *Boulder Dash* compilations for VIC-20 and Oric (bit.ly/boulderdash-vic and bit.ly/boulderdash-oric). The BBC is alive and kicking.

</BODY>

<INTRO> FIVE RECENT PROJECTS TO CHECK OUT AT BBCMICRO.CO.UK </INTRO>

APACHE CANYON

Rob Stone

Since we reviewed the game in **RG** 271, Rob has added music and other changes. He is currently working on something new. />

CRYSTAL CASTLE 40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

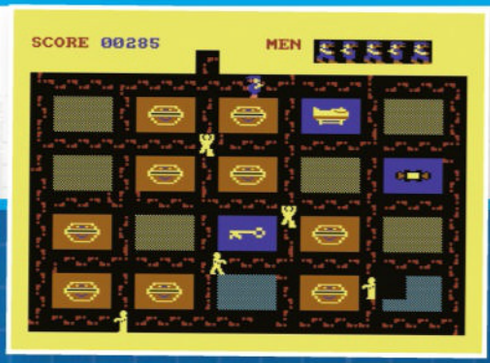
Graham & Adrian Nelson

With the help of ToyLobster, new puzzles, music and improved graphics have been added to this classic 1984 adventure. />

LADY BUG

Lovebug

This has been in development since 2021. It's a very polished adaptation of the 1981 arcade maze game with its shifting doors. />



<!--- [C64] TIME TO ESCAPE FROM LEVEL 3 OF OH MUMMY! --->

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

Acorn: Acorn Pad from fizgog6502 is a palette, map, and character set editor for Atom, Electron and BBC. Grab it from bit.ly/acornpad />

Game Boy Advance: Arugulaz brings the arcade classic *Gorf* to the GBA. You can get blasting at bit.ly/gorf-gba />

Intellivision: *Montezuma's Revenge* is now available on physical cartridge, with a limited-edition ROM release also available. Go exploring at intellivisioncollector.com />

Lynx: Lynx Jam 2025, based around a monochrome palette and tileset, had eight varied entries. You can view them at bit.ly/lynxjam-2025 />

Master System: Jim Blimey's *Roojliek* is a classic ASCII Roguelike, which is also available for ZX Spectrum. Download it at bit.ly/roojliek />

Mega Drive: Mauro Xavier released a new beta of *Final Fight MD*, featuring four playable characters. Play it at bit.ly/finalfight-md />

MSX: *Cow Abductors, Too!* is a funny puzzle game from Paxanga Software where you must abduct cows using UFOs. Get abducting at bit.ly/cow-msx />

NES: *Virtua Agent* is a *Virtua Cop* demake by RBG Entertainment, compatible with the Zapper. Get shooting at bit.ly/virtua-nes />

Plus/4: *Stab 'N Dash* is a *Green Beret* tribute from Csabo and Kichy. Fight your way to bit.ly/stabndash to play it. />

Various: Fans of the classic Amstrad game *Oh Mummy!* can check out the new C64 version by Blazon at bit.ly/mummy-c64 and Fitosoft's CGA conversion for DOS at bit.ly/mummy-cga />

ZX Spectrum: The impressive *World Of Spells* is a first-person maze game with ray casting. The digital download is $6 from bit.ly/worldofspells-zx while the Bitmap Soft preorder is £12 from bit.ly/worldofspells-tape

Jet-Pac Willy from Animated Al mixes two Spectrum classics. Find it at bit.ly/jetpacwilly />

CHAMPION CODER

CHRISTIAN CLARKE

<INTRO> AMIGA AND MEGA DRIVE FAN CHRISTIAN IS MAKING GREAT USE OF THE SCORPION ENGINE </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: CAMDEN TOWN, LONDON, UK WEBSITE: CAMDENTOWNGAMES.ITCH.IO FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE, AMIGA PREVIOUS GAMES: DYLAN THE SPACEMAN AND THE GREEN SMELLY ALIENS FROM MARS, SUBMARINE ATTACK, TANK ATTACK, SUPER ROBIN WORKING ON: SUPER ROBIN 2, STEEL FURY! RETURN TO PLANET EARTH />

HOW DID YOU START MAKING MEGA DRIVE GAMES, CHRISTIAN?

I became aware of the Scorpion Engine. There seems to be a bit of a buzz with the Mega Drive. I wanted to contribute to keeping the machine alive with new games. The Scorpion Engine links to Tiled for creating level maps. For drawing sprites and background tiles, I use Corel PaintShop Pro. Sound files I try to source from royalty-free websites like Pixalbay. If I am forced to create music files, then I would use Deflemask. I always test the completed ROM on real Sega hardware.

<!--- CHRISTIAN CLARKE HAS JUST FINISHED SUPER ROBIN AND IS NOW WORKING ON A NEW PROJECT. --->

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO MAKE THE SUPER ROBIN GAMES?

Mousetrap by Tynesoft, a single-screen platform game where you collect items to open the door to exit the level. The idea of giving the main character power-ups was in preparation for the sequel, which was always planned to be a side-scrolling platformer.

HOW ABOUT THE MAIN CHARACTER?

The main character was a development of an old Amiga platform game I made using Brian Bell's Reality Game Creator. The sprite started life looking very similar to Tiki from *The NewZealand Story*. It went through countless redraws before reaching its final version. I like to have a British feel to my games, and the Robin allows me to do a stereotypical English countryside with hedgehogs and rolling green fields.

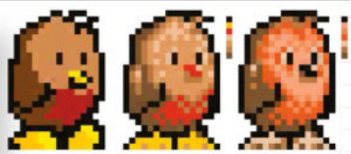
WHAT HAVE YOU STRUGGLED WITH?

The most difficult part for me is always creating the music. Thankfully, the hugely talented Simone Bernacchia, whom I worked with before on some Amiga games, offered to help. I had a heart-stopping moment when my laptop crashed, just as I was 99% through completing *Super Robin*. Thankfully, I had the files saved on the cloud.

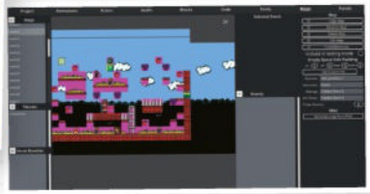
WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

A horizontal WWII shoot-'em-up, and *Steel Fury! Return To Planet Earth* (working title), an overhead *Gauntlet*/*Alien Breed*-type game. Your tank explores an 8-directional scrolling map seeking out the exit to the next level, avoiding patrolling ships and tanks.

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] COLLECT THE FRUIT AND HEARTS TO HELP ROBIN ESCAPE THE LEVEL. --->



<!--- EDITING A LEVEL OF SUPER ROBIN IN THE SCORPION ENGINE. --->



DATA BURST

SONIC GX

<INFO FORMAT: AMSTRAD PLUS / GX4000 CREDITS: CONDENSE TEAM (TARGHAN, NORECESS, TOTO, CED) PRICE: FREE DOWNLOAD WEB: BIT.LY/SONICGX-CPCPLUS />

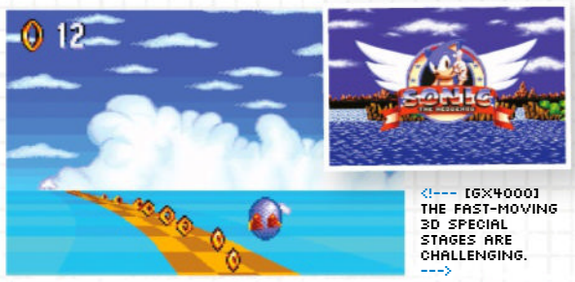
<BODY> **Amstrad fans were looking forward to seeing the blue hedgehog since the first footage appeared in 2019.** Inspired by the classic Master System game, there are four Zones in *Sonix GX*, containing two Acts each – Green Hill, Bridge, Jungle and Sky City (which features conveyor belts and moving platforms, similar to Scrap Brain Zone).

There are also hidden Chaos Emeralds to find as play progresses and Sonic receives an extra life once he's collected 50 gold rings. As with the original game, Sonic loses his rings if he's hit, with a second hit causing him to lose a life if he's without rings. Sonic can roll up to damage most enemies, but must avoid falling into water or spikes. There are also four impressive 3D Special Stages, where Sonic runs into the screen, collecting a set number of rings and jumping over spikey mines.

This is very impressive, showing what the hardware can do in skilled hands. The graphics are excellent and scroll smoothly, and the soundtrack evokes the classic original tunes. However, Sonic himself is quite a large, blocky sprite and lacks inertia; his size can make certain jumps trickier, especially when dealing with Robotnik's machines. There are no power-up TVs to smash or loop-de-loops to run around either. While it lacks depth with only eight levels, searching for Chaos Emeralds does add to the fun. If you love the Amstrad and Sonic, you really do need to give this a play. </BODY>

SCORE: 87%

<!--- [GX4000] AS EVER, DR ROBOTNIK BRINGS HIS MECHANICAL CONTRAPTIONS FOR SONIC TO DESTROY WITH CAREFUL ATTACKS. --->



<!--- [GX4000] THE FAST-MOVING 3D SPECIAL STAGES ARE CHALLENGING. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [DREAMCAST] THERE IS POTENTIAL PROFIT IN BUYING THESE CANS OF PERIVASCULAR FLUID. --->

<!--- [DREAMCAST] HOLD B TO EXTEND YOUR HAILING BEAMS AND CONTACT THIS TRADER. --->

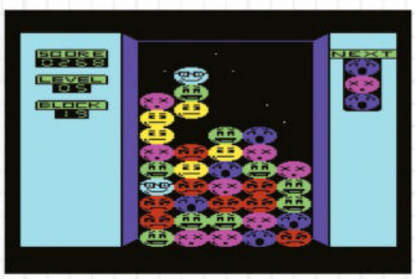
BLACK SCREEN

<INFO FORMAT: DREAMCAST, STEAM CREDITS: CAPTKUSO PRICE: $9.99 (ITCH) / £8.50 (STEAM) WEB: BIT.LY/BLACKSCREEN-DC / BIT.LY/BLACKSCREEN-STEAM />

<BODY> **This distinctive black-and-white space trading game sees you exploring a solar system.** Visit the stations to talk to animal characters and find out more about what you need to do. You can hail traders to buy and sell commodities; helpfully, the screens show whether you will make a profit or loss on the transaction. Shooting asteroids can reveal extra goods that can be picked up and sold. Once you have earned enough, you can upgrade your ship (with heat shielding essential to explore certain areas, but expensive). The streamlined navigation and simple controls make this a breeze to get into, with the quest taking about five hours. It's an enjoyable nostalgia trip that evokes memories of *Elite* and *Empire*. </BODY>

SCORE: 84%

<!--- [C64] THE MAIN MENU IS EASY TO USE. --->



<!--- [VIC-20] ALL AROUND, DIFFERENT FACES I SEE, SOME ARE HAPPY, SOME IN MISERY. --->

QUARX

<INFO FORMAT: VIC-20 (+35K MEMORY EXPANSION), C64, PET CREDITS: DAVID MURRAY (PROGRAMMING), NOELLE AMAN (MUSIC), PIOTR RADECKI (GRAPHICS), TROY ABLAN (CONVERSION TOOLS) PRICE: FREE DOWNLOAD / PHYSICAL CARTRIDGE FROM TFW8B.COM/ TBC WEB: THE8BITGUY.COM />

<BODY> **The 8-Bit Guy's take on *Columns* is certainly worth playing.** It gives you a choice of four graphic sets (faces, blocks, symbols, fruit – represented with abstract designs on the PET) and three difficulties (four, five, or six colours). Like *Columns*, sets of three shapes constantly drop down and are cleared when three or more are matched in a row (vertically, horizontally, or diagonally). The VIC and C64 music are good, the VIC graphics are nicely designed, and it plays very well. It lacks advanced gameplay features, such as wildcards or blocking pieces, but is still plenty of fun. </BODY>

SCORE: 83%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> PSYTRONIK'S JASON MACKENZIE TALKS ABOUT SHERWOOD, THE NEW GAME FROM THE TEAM BEHIND MUSKETEER </INTRO>

<BODY> **Jason 'Kenz' Mackenzie is very proud of the latest Psytronik release, telling us, "*Sherwood* was coded by Ola Zandelin, with graphics and hand-painted artwork by Dennis Gustafsson.** It also features loading music by David Whittaker courtesy of C64Audio."

Where *Musketeer* was all about sword fighting, *Sherwood*'s take on Robin Hood works differently, with 30 packed screens to explore. "There's more emphasis on exploration and item collecting in *Sherwood*," explains Jason. "You need to collect coins to access the secret ending. The bow and arrows add a different gameplay mechanic as you need to fire arrows to dispatch enemies and to hit flames that open up new parts of the screens, along with other secrets!"

The digital download is available at bit.ly/sherwood-c64, while physical boxed editions can be preordered from bit.ly/sherwood-preorder "The boxed collector's edition will contain the game (on tape, disk, or cartridge), manual, stickers, a badge, a keyring, an A4 glossy art card, and a soundtrack CD (which will also include the soundtracks from *Musketeer* as a bonus)," adds Jason. Try the playable Christmas demo at bit.ly/sherwood-christmas! </BODY>

<!--- [C64] ON THE FIRST SCREEN, ROBIN CAN SHOOT THE TWO WHITE TORCHES TO ALTER THE SCREEN LAYOUT AND MAKE PROGRESS. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

SCRAP AND SCROLL

Darran and Tim reminisce about their favourite scrolling fighters

DARRAN JONES

TIM EMPEY

Scrolling fighters were everywhere in the Eighties and Nineties, but largely disappeared during the Noughties. The last few years has seen the genre making a comeback, so Tim and Darran have been discussing a selection of their favourite examples.

DARRAN

What's the first scrolling fighter you played, Tim?

TIM

Oh, that's a toss-up between *Target: Renegade* on the C64, *Double Dragon* in the arcade, and I'm sure I played *Kung-Fu Master* on some system, maybe arcade because I remember the sprites being rather large. Does *Bruce Lee* count? There's not that much fighting in it, not as much as the rest of them anyway. What were your first ones?

DARRAN

Some nice choices there, Tim, although *Bruce Lee* stretches things a little bit. *Kung-Fu Master* was definitely mine as it was in our local chip shop. Shame the Amstrad version was a bit naff. Did you play *Double Dragon* a lot?

TIM

I did play a good bit of *Double Dragon*. I remember being on a trip to Newcastle (in Northern Ireland) and asking one of the group leaders if they knew how to do the elbow move. And was completely baffled that they didn't know. I just assumed they would because they were a bit older than me. And then I spent far too much money playing it on a ski trip with school, which meant I couldn't afford the £2 to pay for the proficiency award. Oops!

DARRAN

As much as I love *Double Dragon*, you could rinse that game in the arcade with just the elbow move or headbutt. Did you play any of the sequels?

TIM

I played *Double Dragon 2* on the Amiga, which isn't the best version really. I think I had a go on one of the recent-ish remakes, but it didn't really grab me as it did when I was a kid. I spent a lot of money on *Final Fight* in the arcade too. It might be one of my favourite scrolling fighters. Did you get much millage out of the *Double Dragon* sequels?

DARRAN

I liked the single-player Game Boy and NES versions. I loved *Double Dragon Gaiden* and the GBA remake is great as well. There seemed to be loads of these games during the Nineties. Did you have any favourites aside from the excellent *Final Fight* and the *Streets Of Rage* games?

TIM

The *X-Men* arcade game, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *The Simpsons*, were all played at various leisure centres and swimming pools. I think I went to play in the arcades more than swimming or whatever.

DARRAN

Did you play them with mates or strangers? I really didn't like it when a couple of strangers joined me and my mate to play *Turtles* or something similar, it caused me all sorts of anxiety.

» [Arcade] Widely considered to be the first scrolling fighter, *Kung-Fu Master* still holds up today.

TIM

Huh, I don't think I ever played with strangers, it just wasn't something that happened. So yeah, just mates. But I get you, that would be pretty troubling. Maybe I just went to sparsely populated arcades. Have there been any recent games that have caught your eye? I played some *Marvel Cosmic Invasion* recently, which seems pretty good.

DARRAN

Yeah that was good fun. There's been something of a revival in recent years. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge* is great, *Streets Of Rage 4* was superb and I've heard amazing things about

» [PlayStation 2] *God Hand* is one of the most impressive attempts at redefining what a scrolling fighter could be.

» [PC] *Streets Of Rage 4* is a superb return to form for the series. We'd love to see another sequel.

» [Arcade] *Double Dragon* was a pivotal release for the genre, later getting eclipsed by Capcom's *Final Fight*.

Absolum but haven't played it yet. Why do you think they're back in vogue currently?

TIM

It must be collective nostalgia, or bandwagon jumping at the very least. But yeah, there has been quite a resurgence. It's probably time for a new *Golden Axe*!

DARRAN

Sega is apparently making one, but it also published *Beast Rider*, so who knows if it will be good. I suppose we can't talk about the resurgence without mentioning the decline that started during the 32-bit period. Why do we think that was?

TIM

Saturation from the *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors* series. God I hated reviewing them, it just felt like the exact same thing over and over again. Though I did come up with 'Die Nasty Warriors' because I'm hilarious.

DARRAN

I actually did like all of those, but yeah they did get quite monotonous at times. How about *God Hand*, would you consider that an evolution of the standard scrolling fighter?

TIM

God Hand is the evolution of everything! And the end of everything too. Or the end of itself at least. Such a shame how that panned out. But everyone should play it, because it's amazing.

» [PC] Tim would love the *Capcom Beat Em Up Collection*, it has several of his favourite examples, including *Final Fight* and *Knights Of The Round*.

> "God Hand is the evolution of everything!"
> TIM EMPEY

DARRAN

It certainly felt like a massive departure after *Final Fight: Streetwise*, that's for sure. Did you play Capcom's scrolling fighter collection that came out a few years back, there were some belters on that.

TIM

Not recently, but I played most of them in the arcades back in the day. I always enjoyed *Knights Of The Round*.

DARRAN

You're missing out mate. It's great fun, even if it didn't include *Alien Vs Predator*. Silly Capcom.

» [C64] Poor old Tim played *Target: Renegade* on the C64, so he never experienced its excellent two-player mode.

» [Xbox] The *Dynasty Warriors* series and spin-offs have been a huge success for Tecmo Koei over the years.

» [Arcade] Games like *The Simpsons* had a multiplayer mode, which would set off Darran's anxiety if he was joined by a stranger.

READERS REACT

Your favourite scrolling fighters that outfight the rest

Sanny Syberfeldt

This is the rare genre where I prefer a modern game since nothing comes close to *Streets Of Rage 4*. It's just perfect in every aspect and might be my overall favourite game of all time. As for retro games, the *Double Dragon* games for the NES and Game Boy are still fun to replay!

Antiques For Geeks

I shall always have a spot in my heart for *Kung-Fu Master* on the C64. I never saw it in the arcades back in the Eighties, just the conversion with the pistol cheat for the first level. It didn't let you progress to the next level if you used it, which kind of reinforced that there were no shortcuts in life.

Slurms MacKenzie

Golden Axe, lots of fun smacking monsters around but also creating a cool fantasy world at the same time!

Robb from 8/16/32-bit

Streets Of Rage 2. Everything about it is just perfect. The graphics, the gameplay, and the music. It all comes together to be the defining game of the genre.

Stuart Gipp

For years it was *Streets Of Rage 2*, but I honestly think the more recent *Streets Of Rage 4* topped it; what a spectacular game that is. That said, it's probably level pegging with the SNES version of *Turtles In Time* – another masterpiece, with absolutely amazing music.

Ashley H

Golden Axe was fun. Plus the Amstrad and Amiga versions were decent.

Game Revo

Full Metal Furies gave each character a highly specialised skillset such that good combos required close collaboration. An incredibly satisfying game with levels chock-full of secrets and riddles! Sadly it never really found its audience.

Martin Dewar

For nostalgia sake, it's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles In Time*.

Robert August de Meijer

Streets of Rage 4 is the current gold standard, but for a long time it was *Final Fight 3*. It has a bunch of moves for variety, and having a CPU controlled teammate was neat!

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

SIGNED STREETS OF RAGE RECORDS

"I bought them on release from Data Discs, but got them signed by Yuzo Koshiro when I met him at a 2017 gig at Fabric in London."

AMOUNT PAID: £50

SIGNED DOOM II

"I bought this on eBay, and met John at a talk (at the Cambridge Computer Museum) in 2018. He and his wife Brenda, loved that it was the floppy version and he signed it."

AMOUNT PAID: ABOUT £50

BIG BOX COLLECTING

Pete Armour collects for many systems, but especially big box computer titles

Words by Faith Johnson

BIO

NAME:
Pete Armour

LOCATION:
Buckinghamshire, UK

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£30,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Amiga

FAVOURITE GAME:
The Secret Of Monkey Island

SOCIAL MEDIA:
YouTube: onaretrotip

We ask Pete Armour about his first gaming experiences. "It was with the LCD handhelds in the Eighties, like the *Donkey Kong* Game & Watch," he tells us. "Then it progressed with the micros at friends' houses, like the C64 and Spectrum, but particularly the BBC Micro, as well as visiting arcades. Our first system at my family home was an Amiga 500, so that always provides my fondest memories. That was late-1990, so the Amiga was really the best thing going."

So that's Pete's childhood gaming, but how did he get into gaming as an adult? "I started about 15 years ago in my early 30s, when some lifestyle changes meant that I had more spare time and money. It started as a desire to dip back into the games I had as a kid, beginning with the Mega Drive, Game Gear and Game Boy. This then expanded to discovering new systems that I never had, like the Vectrex and PC Engine. Then it snowballed, so now I collect hardware and software for many systems and have even started dipping into arcade machines."

It's not just collecting games that has gripped Pete, as his YouTube channel, Onaretrotip, has close to 40,000 followers now. We ask Pete what it feels like to be able to share his experiences with so many people. "Oh, it's been wonderful," he smiles. "Before doing YouTube, I didn't really know anyone that was into gaming, but now I've met hundreds of like-minded people and have made countless friends with whom to share this amazing hobby! It's also a dream to be able to interview the people who made my favourite childhood games."

Pete then tells us about his favourite consoles and computers. "I love the Mega Drive, Amiga, DOS PC and Game Boy because they capture that magical early Nineties time, which I think was such a creative and experimental time for gaming, before everything got too corporate. The Mega Drive is particularly exciting as its indie scene has been thriving, which is amazing to see after so many years. Amiga and DOS are really fun to collect for because the big boxes are just beautiful works of art, and often come with all sorts of interesting gubbins."

But what about Pete's future collecting goals? "For the most part, I have everything I wanted to collect, but there are a few gaps. Mainly a few big box Amiga and DOS games, but some of them can go for crazy money now. But I'm really enjoying collecting the new indie games for old consoles, so I'll continue to support that scene."

We finish up asking what Pete's Holy Grail item is for the collection. "Having recently bought my first arcade cab, it would probably be a Candy Cab. I always wanted one as they look amazing and are comfortable to use. The dream would be to add a Sega Astro City to the setup as I think they're the best of the Candy Cabs, and the 29" screens are fantastic."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

FALLOUT NEW VEGAS UK COLLECTOR'S EDITION

"Found by chance on eBay. The seller didn't list it as number 1, so I only paid the normal going rate at the time. It's #1 of 6,650."

AMOUNT PAID: £40

BOXED ORIGINAL DMG GAME BOY

"I bought this on eBay very early on. This *Tetris* pack-in box is just so nostalgic."

AMOUNT PAID: ABOUT £50

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

MONKEY ISLAND 2 ORIGINAL 1991 SHOP DISPLAY SIGN

■ "A fellow YouTuber found this for me at a retro-gaming shop in the UK and called me. It's not the most valuable piece, but it's certainly unique and looks amazing on display. I've never seen another one!"

PAID: £80

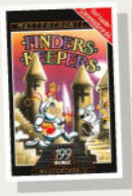
BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

ZX SPECTRUM

Those simply wanting to play can pick up one loose for as little as **£40.** Boxed examples are **£60+,** with good condition boxed versions hitting **£80+.**



FINDER KEEPERS (C64)

You won't need to find too much to play this Mastertronic classic. Boxed condition cassettes sell regularly for under **£5.**

MS PAC-MAN (ATARI LYNX)

You won't be wacca-wacking your head against a wall as loose carts cost **£25,** with boxed copies reaching **£45.**

VIROCOP (AMIGA)

There are plenty of loose disks for under **£10,** but getting a complete boxed copy would cost over **£100.**

ROMANCING SAGA (SUPER FAMICOM)

The romance isn't lost with loose carts costing **£5,** and complete boxed under **£10,** but there is the language barrier to consider. NTSC-U carts are obviously a lot more.

CASPER (PLAYSTATION)

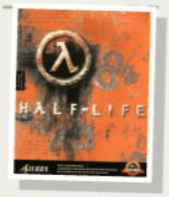
You won't get a fright as complete copies sell for around **£7.50,** with mint copies costing as little as **£20.**

RAYMAN (PLAYSTATION)

Complete boxed copies of the platinum version can cost under **£5.** The original release of the game will only cost about **£3** more.

SONIC UNLEASHED (XBOX 360)

Unleashing this on your collection will range from **£7.50** to **£20,** depending on the level of condition you spring for.



HALF-LIFE (PC)

Budget releases cost less than **£5,** but the original big box version costs over **£25** and as much as **£50** for mint copies.

HOW MUCH?!

POKÉMON YELLOW VERSION: SPECIAL PIKACHU EDITION

One buyer certainly shouted, "Pikachu, I choose you" after paying nearly **£3,000** for this excellent condition sealed *Pokémon Yellow* for the original Game Boy.

Prices correct at time of print

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

LETTER CRAFTING

Retro Gamer freelancer Graeme Mason returns to talk about his newsletters

Back when I was a young man [Crikey, we're going back _that_ far? – Ed], someone told me that starting and writing a regular blog was a good way of testing your skills, while acting as an early calling card for when you don't have actual paid work to show off. I jumped in with Jdanddiet's Blog (my online name on the **Retro Gamer** forum, RIP), writing posts about movies, gaming and music. I wrote about my favourite games and what I was currently playing. I posted hidden movie gems and analysis of pop videos. And, of course, I wrote about the videogames I played growing up, most notably on the ZX Spectrum. Note those last four words.

I don't know if Darran read my blog while he was musing over whether to let another reader have a stab at writing for **Retro Gamer**, but it certainly didn't seem to do any harm. Fifteen years and almost 250 articles later, I'm assuming he doesn't mind me working for him. Yet while pitching and writing for **Retro Gamer** is great – and I'll never tire of it – it does have to fit into the mag's structure and feature templates. Sometimes I think back to that time writing Jdanddiet's Blog, posting views and opinions on whatever random game I happened to fancy writing about at that particular moment. Wouldn't it be fun to be able to do that again?

Yes, it would, but I have no appetite for starting another blog. Instead, I did something different. I subscribe to several newsletters, and my favourite is without doubt the wry and topical Hit Points by ex-*Edge* scribe Nathan Brown. After cadging some tips from Nathan, I decided on my topic, gaming on the ZX Spectrum, and ploughed into the world of newsletters, sending out the first *On The ZX Spectrum* on the 9 June 2023, to 183 lucky readers. Today, the subscriber count is almost 1,500, and I'm currently compiling number 27.

Ironically, after saying I was enjoying escaping the rigid template structure of my other work, I have kept to a similar format for each *On The ZX Spectrum*. We kick off with some news and a Favourite Five, five Spectrum games (or other related media) that tie in to current events or what I'm working on elsewhere; then there's a Game Of The Month, focussing on a special Spectrum game and a self-explanatory Hidden Gem. Finally, there's an interview with a developer or a related Speccy person to wrap things up.

While sometimes hard work, and always time-consuming, I still enjoy writing *On The ZX Spectrum*, and putting together extra newsletters and videos for my small but dedicated band of Patreons, known as Magic Knights after David Jones' famous budget series. There's even an irregular Spectrum Next edition too, known as *Nextra*, featuring reviews of new Next games and more developer interviews. I love my Next, but could never actually produce a game for it, so being able to spread the love of the 21st century Speccy via my words to this little corner of the internet is the least I can do to help the Next community.

> "On The ZX Spectrum is, and always will be, a free newsletter"
> **GRAEME MASON**

On The ZX Spectrum is, and always will be, a free newsletter, and I'm grateful to every single person who signs up and takes the time to read it. I'm branching out this year with a new newsletter, focussing on the ever-burgeoning indie gaming market. With *Indie Horror Gamer*, I'm hoping to highlight some of those indie horror games that might struggle to find an audience among the mass of games on Steam and beyond – and let's face it, that's most of them.

But *On The ZX Spectrum* will continue. Researching and writing each newsletter is a freedom, and feedback is generally favourable. Some may prefer new game news, while others are purely about the nostalgia. Hopefully, I can continue to strike a balance between these, while extracting the odd smile here and there.

To subscribe to *On The ZX Spectrum*, go to: bit.ly/onthespeccy, or if you don't fancy typing that in, there's a page about the newsletter on my website, wizwords.net While you're there, you can have a nose over *On The ZX Spectrum* #1. Meanwhile, *Indie Horror Gamer* will start soon. Head over to bit.ly/indiehor to sign up, again for free – if you dare.

FAVOURITE MOMENTS

PICKING OUT MY FIVE FAVOURITE MOMENTS FROM ON THE ZX SPECTRUM

LEE GINTY INTERVIEW

Lee ran Microdealer, one of those all-powerful companies that controlled what we saw back in the Eighties. It was a fascinating alternate glimpse at the software industry back then.

TO DAD, WITH LOVE

It was a rare moment when my Dad joined me on my Spectrum, so for one wistful Favourite Five, I looked back at a quintet of games I played with pops, including *Scrabble* and *Night Gunner*.

TWO CHATS

On The ZX Spectrum #17 included not one, but two interviews: Ocean's Doug Burns on Game Of The Month *Ping Pong* and Andy Severn on the Hidden Gem, *Powerplay*.

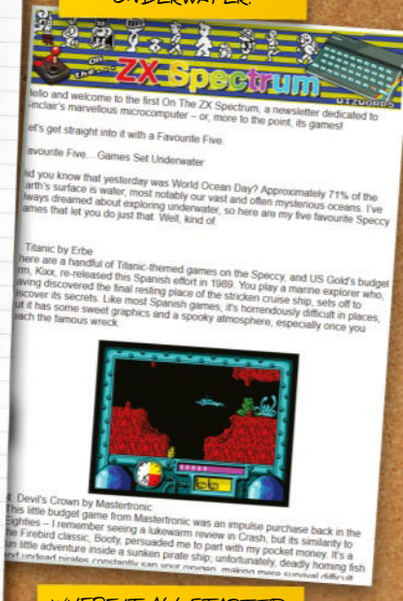
STEPHEN VALENTE

Another entertaining chat, this time with *Crash* reader Stephen Valente, who caused a storm with some strong opinions in the letters pages of the magazine back in 1986.

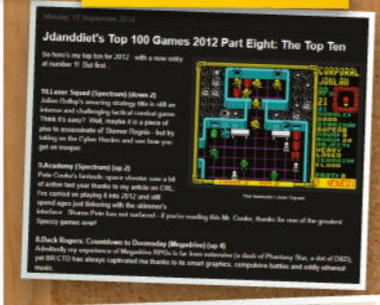
BEER!

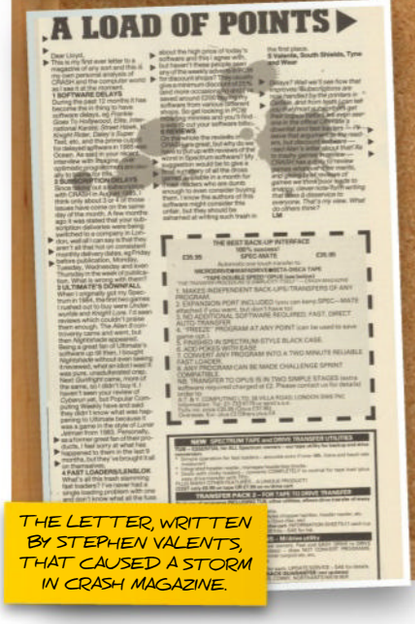
To celebrate International Beer Day last year, *On The ZX Spectrum* #15 included a Favourite Five of the best pints in Spectrum games, from *180* to – yes! – *EastEnders*.

ON THE ZX SPECTRUM #1 AND A FAVOURITE FIVE ON GAMES SET UNDERWATER.


ZX Spectrum
Hello and welcome to the first On The ZX Spectrum, a newsletter dedicated to Sinclair's marvellous microcomputer – or, more to the point, its games!
Let's get straight into it with a Favourite Five.
Favourite Five... Games Set Underwater
Did you know that yesterday was World Ocean Day? Approximately 71% of the Earth's surface is water, most notably our vast and often mysterious oceans. I've always dreamed about exploring underwater, so here are my five favourite Speccy games that let you do just that. Well, kind of.
Titanic by Erbe
There are a handful of Titanic-themed games on the Speccy, and US Gold's budget effort in 1989. You play a marine explorer who, erm, Kixx, re-released this Spanish effort in 1989. You play a marine explorer who, having discovered the final resting place of the stricken cruise ship, sets off to discover its secrets. Like most Spanish games, it's horrendously difficult in places, but it has some sweet graphics and a spooky atmosphere, especially once you reach the famous wreck.
Devil's Crown by Masterbronic
This little budget game from Masterbronic was an impulse purchase back in the Eighties – I remember seeing a lukewarm review in Crash, but its similarity to the Firebird classic, Booty, persuaded me to part with my pocket money. It's a fun little adventure inside a sunken pirate ship, unfortunately, deadly homing fish and undead pirates constantly sap your oxygen, making mere survival difficult

WHERE IT ALL STARTED: JDANDDIET'S BLOG.





THE LETTER, WRITTEN BY STEPHEN VALENTE, THAT CAUSED A STORM IN CRASH MAGAZINE.

THE ON THE ZX SPECTRUM BANNER, LOVINGLY CRAFTED BY GARY ARNOTT.
On the... ZX Spectrum
WIZWORDS
SOME PEOPLE UNSUBSCRIBED AFTER THIS APRIL 1ST GAG!
I know, you're probably thinking Leopards don't change their spots - but this is happening, folks. Maybe it's working on the Graftgold book and talking to the legend that is Andrew Braybrook every week. As of next week, On The ZX Spectrum will be On The Commodore 64
Here's the new banner:-
ON THE COMMODORE 64
Now I know some of you are going to be upset at this abrupt change of direction. But let's face it. The Commodore 64 was better. It had more memory, able to fit in several thousand hues of brown into its palette and some lovely blocky sprites.
Thank you for sticking with this big change - I'm sure we can move on to bigger and better things with On The Commodore 64!
Until then, keep it burnt umber, Comm-fans!
JUST A SAMPLE OF SOME OF THE PRIZE GIVEAWAYS AND COMPETITIONS.
THE NEXTRA BANNER, DESIGNED BY GARY ARNOTT.
WIZWORDS
ON THE ZX SPECTRUM: NEXTRA
A NEW NEWSLETTER FOR 2026: INDIE HORROR GAMER.
Indie Horror Gamer
ON THE ZX SPECTRUM
NEXTRAORDINARY
OTZXS: NEXTRA
TOP RATED
THE BEST SPECTRUM NEXT GAMES GET THE NEXTRA TOP RATED AWARD. (ZZAP IMAGE COURTESY OF FUSION RETRO BOOKS.)
MAGIC KNIGHT PATREONS GET TO WATCH ME STRUGGLE PLAY SPECTRUM GAMES.
Hit Points
MY FAVOURITE NEWSLETTER: NATHAN BROWN'S HIT POINTS.
WESTON SM 0 10 CHELMSFORD

READERS REACT

Subscribers' thoughts on On The ZX Spectrum

Jon B
Issue 4 springs to mind as one of the best. A spiffing read, featuring a *Chaos* playthrough and an interview with Ben Stone from *Crash*. It made a six-hour flight delay almost tolerable!

Chris J
I personally love all of it, including the Favourite Fives, latest news and updates in the Speccy world, interviews with coding legends and also the great giveaways.

Sal G
OTZXS has given me countless joyful trips down memory lane, introduced me to brilliant games I somehow missed the first time around, and topped it all off with great in-depth interviews with ZX Spectrum legends.

Kev G
I would say I enjoy being reminded about games I had forgotten about. Or games I never played back in the day that are worth a quick load.

Rich B
This particular one opened up with Jason Vorhees (and Mrs Doubtfire?!), and a super article entitled Favourite Five Spectrum Games Based On 18-Rated Movies, inappropriate games which we were obviously all over as primary school kids!

Gordon S
OTZXS feels just like getting *Crash* delivered in the Eighties, and I always read it immediately. The interviews are my favourite part, like Dermot Quinn, who wrote the script for the *Yes, Prime Minister* game, and Keith Warrington, who did the graphics for *Skool Daze* and *Back to Skool*.

Simon
OTZXS is a favourite, even as a Commodore 64 owner [Wow – Ed]. Great humour, and a top read.

» [SNES] *Sparkster*'s levels are filled with mini-bosses such as this robotic keyboard-playing elephant.

SPARKSTER

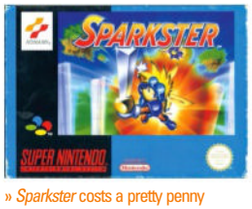
Following the success of Rocket Knight Adventures on the Mega Drive, Konami developed a new title for the Super Nintendo in 1994. Sparkster continued the story of the titular opossum's fight to save his people

Words by Faith Johnson

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
- **» DEVELOPER:** KONAMI
- **» PLATFORM:** SNES
- **» RELEASED:** 1994
- **» PRICE TODAY:** £300+

» [SNES] The Rocket Knight's iconic move is his ability to blast off in any direction.



» *Sparkster* costs a pretty penny nowadays. It's also a completely different game to the *Sparkster* released on Sega's Mega Drive.

THE GAME

Sparkster is set in a land inhabited by peaceful opossums called Eginasem. One day, the evil Lioness invades with her rabble of dogs and kidnaps Princess Flora. It's up to a Rocket Knight named Sparkster to rescue the princess and save Eginasem from destruction. The game also features a subplot as one of Sparkster's fellow Rocket Knights, Axel Gear, has betrayed him by joining the enemy forces and leading the assault.

Sparkster has several abilities that help him on his quest, all of which will be needed to succeed. His main weapon is a basic shooting move that propels large bullets at enemies and is the best way to clear your path. He can also perform a spinning dash that clears large groups of enemies when surrounded. The most iconic move is Sparkster's rocket manoeuvre, which, once charged, blasts him off in any direction. Other moves include hanging from ledges, sliding down rails and swimming.

Sparkster takes place across nine levels, although only seven are playable on easy mode, and the ninth is only playable on hard mode. All the levels have a set theme, from the usual forest-type area right through to a level set on a moon. What helps *Sparkster* stand out from other games in the genre is that many of the levels have a new gameplay mechanic. Examples include one stage in the form of a shoot-'em-up, while another requires taking control of a robot in an auto-scrolling stage.

THE QUALITY

The game was well-received by critics, and many praised its variety, but several commented on the lack of new ideas. In the November 94 issue of *GamePro* magazine, Leonardo da Video felt *Sparkster* wasn't as good as the Mega Drive original. In his review, he said, "*Sparkster* isn't as fresh as the original *Rocket Knight*. The controls should've been improved, and new weapons would've been nice. Still, *Rocket Knight* rookies will do well with *Sparkster*." However, he was more impressed with the variety of gameplay mechanics. "To *Sparkster*'s credit, the cart has lots

» [SNES] There are several machines to control in the game, such as riding a mechanical ostrich.

of game-play perks: multiple routes, hidden rooms and terrain that varies with the difficulty level."

In the November 1994 issue of *Super Play*, Tony Mott was more enthusiastic about *Sparkster*. In the closing remarks of his 89% review, he said, "Games like this are fast becoming rarities. It has style, imagination, surprises and, of course, that vital helping of Konami's special ingredient X. A cracking game."

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

Sparkster was released quite late in the Super Nintendo's life, coming in the autumn of 1994, when gamers were looking towards a new generation of consoles. The other major reason that may have affected sales was *Donkey Kong Country*. It was also released in the autumn of 1994, and Rare's classic platformer got most of the attention from Super Nintendo players at the time. With fewer gamers picking it up, this would've led to fewer copies of *Sparkster* being produced by Konami. Another factor that affects the price is how few complete copies are in circulation. While there are usually quite a few loose carts for sale, finding a good-condition boxed copy can take time. *Sparkster* also features a very collectable character, platform games with mascots are always popular, and this creates an extra demand within the collecting scene.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

The cheapest way to play the game on original hardware is with a used loose cartridge, which can be bought for under £40. If you don't wish to stump up the cash for a physical cartridge, the best way to experience *Sparkster* is by buying the *Rocket Knight Adventures: Re-Sparked Collection*. It can be purchased for Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and 5, as well as PC via Steam. With the collection, you'll also get the two Mega Drive titles, the original *Rocket Knight Adventures* and *Sparkster: Rocket Knight Adventures 2*. Extras include an art gallery, soundtrack player and a new boss rush mode. To round out the package, the built-in emulators also have some great features, such as save states, rewind, and a variety of display settings to recreate that retro feel.

» [SNES] Sparkster uses his tail hang move to take a break before swinging down rails.

» [SNES] Graphical effects, such as this water reflection, create some eye-catching scenes within the game.

THE BOTTOM LINE

While *Sparkster* may not be the best platformer to come from the Nineties era of anthropomorphised characters, his only Super Nintendo outing is a solid title with many unique gameplay elements. Sparkster himself is a cool character, and the screen-filling bosses provide a real spectacle as well as a tough challenge. It's an expensive one to own, but collectors will appreciate its qualities, plus it has striking artwork that will look great on the shelf.

I'VE GOT IT!

These collectors have charged their shelves with Rocket Knights

Calvin
I bought a Japanese copy of *Sparkster* in 2019 in a Book Off store in Japan for around 2000 Yen. I still have it in my collection today!

Mad Ness
You won't like my answer, but it was back in 2013 on a bidding site for 12 Euros.

Manuel Frei
I bought a copy of the European (PAL) version with the box but without a manual on 2023-05-15 from a seller on a swiss online market place for 130 Swiss Francs. At that time, it was 145 in USD.

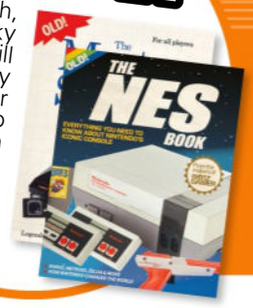
Mama Maji
A loose cart from a second-hand games shop somewhere in the south of France way back in the day, probably only cost me a couple of Francs!

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of one of our classic retro books from our archives. Good luck everyone!



STAR LETTER

MISSING NICK

Hi guys,

I was deeply saddened to learn of Nick's passing and my thoughts go out to his family, friends, and colleagues.

I first came across Nick through the pages of **Retro Gamer**, it was impossible not to be impressed by his work, always entertaining and informative with enough of himself weaved through it to make it stand out, there really aren't enough plaudits to do it justice.

I threw Nick a follow on social media, he responded by following me back, it was there I realised that as talented as Nick was there was a wonderful, warm, kind-hearted person behind the work. As the old adage goes 'to know him was to love him' and in an era where so much of social media was about peacocking to the crowd, he was always welcoming, preferring to share his knowledge and passion instead of gatekeeping it. I began watching his Twitch streams, hanging out in the chat talking nonsense whilst enjoying him play through a selection of titles including *Sakura Wars*, *Valkyria Chronicles* and *Headhunter*.

During Lockdown when things ground to a halt **Retro Gamer** became one of the key constants. Living alone there really wasn't much to focus on, the only contact with other humans being delivery drivers and social media, but **Retro Gamer** arriving through the letterbox every month was one of the few joys to hold on to, and Nick was one of the key reasons I looked forward to it so much.

I'm not the most emotionally stable person, and a couple of times when I was not in a good place he reached out to check in, that was the thing about Nick, he cared, you never felt like an outcast, you never felt different, he had an uncanny knack for making you feel like you belonged, no matter how insignificant you felt, or how lost and alone, he made you feel like you mattered.

We shared similar passions when it came to games, wrestling, and music, I never actually got to meet him. I think we were only in the same place once, at AEW All In in 2023, but buried in a crowd of 70,000 people the chances of us running into each other was always going to be slim, regardless even with only knowing Nick though the digital space he was always a friend.

I'm really going to miss his writing, I'll miss his posts, I'll miss his streaming, but most of all I'm just going to miss him, his absence is keenly felt, there's a gap where he should be and everything feels diminished by him not being around, like the world feels off kilter.

There is some mercy in that he leaves behind a body of work that stands as testament to his talent, whilst Twitch streams expire and past broadcasts disappear into the ether, the printed word remains. I've been going back through past issues of **Retro Gamer** over the last few days and rereading some of his articles, wrapping myself in the joy and comfort they offer.

In a world of plastic people, and bloviating bullshitters, we need more people like Nick.

"Later chumps"

Kara Jane Adams

Thank you Kara, for effortlessly summing up how we all felt about Nick. Like you, we miss him dearly and he'd have been truly touched to read your lovely words.

CHAT
oh wow your people are leveled high
Rose the Racist
jeez
i've always been a little confused
was that general or whatever he is, was that the same guy they met in the forest when they buried the dead enemy soldier?
Because in that cutscene he was very noble and kind hearted.
Alicia
Gallian-520
HKT3030

» Kara is just one of many people who used to enjoy watching Nick stream on Twitch.

» Nick was a huge *Shenmue* fan and was absolutely delighted when he was able to write a cover feature about the series.

NICK THORPE: THE TRIBUTES CONTINUE

To Darran and everyone at **Retro Gamer**,

Time moves on. Games, moments, people, get cruelly left behind. But the memories remain. The sights and sounds, the feelings and emotions, the love and joy. And the more we embrace those memories, the easier it becomes to bear what we have lost.

What I have always loved about **Retro Gamer** is how it revels in memories. Preserves them, explores them, amplifies them. Even while the heart might yearn for the past, you help us appreciate it in the present. And I hope you continue to in the future.

Sending love to everyone at the mag for all you do. I hope you are all coping as well as you can after such a tragic loss. In the words of Iwao Hazuki from *Shenmue* – another of Nick's favourite

» Nick was a huge part of the magazine, so there will always be a place for him in the mag.

CONTACT US

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Future Publishing, Quay House,
The Ambury, Bath,
Somerset, BA1 1UA

Email: retrogamer@futurenet.com

» Nick's love for his family resonated deeply with many readers.

games,"Keep friends, those you love, close to you."
Much love,
Tim Fitches

Dear **Retro Gamer** team,
I have just learnt of the passing of Nick Thorpe (I'm rarely online, so read it in the mag) and it is incredibly sad news. Please pass on my best wishes to his family. I absolutely love your magazine, and Nick's writing was very good. It felt somehow like I knew him, with the connection a good writer can make to their audience, and the news of his untimely departure was a massive shock
Kind regards,
Nick Hawtin

Dear **Retro Gamer** staff,
My head is often found in the sand, so please forgive my tardiness in paying respects to Nick. When I opened the latest issue, something felt different. I stood there holding the magazine in my hands, pondering. Maybe there were less pages, but still, something else felt… unusually off. Of course, once I opened it, it became clear that a large part of the magazine's soul was missing. The 1 December is a crappy day, isn't it? My sister was killed on that date back in 2005. She's still in my thoughts every day, as I'm sure Nick will be to all his loved ones. Condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. I'm sure you'll carry on his legacy and make him proud.
Take care,
Andrew H

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I missed the announcement over Xmas so it was a shock when the new issue arrived and I found it full of tributes to Nick. I've only been a regular reader for a few years but it was still incredibly sad to see that opening Retrobates page and see the blank space where Nick should be. If that was a shock to me I can't imagine what you guys are going through losing such a beloved colleague and friend so young.

Personally I loved Nick's many stories of childhood gaming memories. Like a lot of us I caught the gaming bug as a child and his stories always bought back fond memories of my own. It's going to be strange reading **Retro Gamer** without seeing him there but of course I remain a fan of the mag. Hope you're all staying strong
Luke Middleham

Dear **Retro Gamer** staff,
How sad it was to read of the passing of Nick Thorpe. I loved reading his reviews and that the most important thing to him was family. He will be remembered as a legend of this great magazine and I send all my love and condolences to his family and friends.
Kelvin Courtenay

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

It's still Nick

We're not too sure how you ever get over losing someone like Nick, and we still keenly miss his presence on the mag. Our daily meetings are that little bit quieter without him being in them and not seeing his face pop up on various pages of the mag feels truly surreal. Hopefully it gets easier with time, but we guess our continued grief simply highlights what a big deal he meant to us all.

» We've been truly touched by the number of people writing in to share their condolences and their love for Nick's work.

Thank you again for all the lovely letters about Nick. They really mean a lot to us.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Spectrum game?

» Filbert Wang has shared his *Dizzy* display, that's how much they enjoy the popular series.

Lord Arse!
The Lords Of Midnight. Not just my favourite Spectrum game, but in my mind, one of THE greatest games of all time! How Mike Singleton managed to pack all that goodness into 48K of RAM is anyone's guess. Mine is that it must be magic!

Mark R Jones
Legend Of Avalon by Steve Turner and released by Hewson Consultants. The first game where I really felt I was visiting another land and time. Creepy as flip and full of atmosphere. A true landmark in ZX Spectrum games. AND it came with a beautifully drawn little map!

inspiredcarpet
I know it's boring but there is a reason that *Manic Miner* is so well regarded. I remember going to our local computer shop every day on my way from school to play on it until I could save up enough money from my paper round to buy it.

Jim Caris
Mountains Of Ket, probably because of the name. But my real answer is *Chaos* because it's just as good to play today as it was when released.

Keezees!
Fantasy World Dizzy. The first Speccy game I completed. I did so before my mates, made a map, sold photocopies of it to mates, bought new games, repeated the process. I also speedrun it (tons of glitches in the game), had a 14-minute run before. Overall it's the most fun *Dizzy*, and the music is amazing.

Clippy
Helter Skelter. I know it wasn't the best version of the game (that award goes to the Amiga), but it was the one I grew up with.

aNdy
I was a C64 boy, but on the Spectrum I was happy to play anything written by Steve Turner. That guy was/is a genius!

Filbert Wang
Although there were more comprehensive sequels, a friend and I used to play *Dizzy* for hours on end. A very challenging game and *Dizzy* was scrambled countless times but we still came back for more! Decades later the same friend made this lovely display for me. [It's above – Ed]

retro GAMER

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Sonic Unleashed

RECOMPILING THE PAST

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When we weren't working on the magazine, one of the things Nick and I used to like discussing was revisionist history. It's a topic that often comes up, as we're occasionally accused of it ourselves, but it seems particularly prevalent on YouTube where huge American influencers are able to shape the world of retro for them and their viewers to the one that they remember. And ultimately that's what a lot of immediate gaming history is to us, the things we remember growing up with. We all know that the great American crash wasn't even a ripple over here, but we're still told it was this huge thing, because it was immensely important to those experiencing it overseas in one of the world's biggest nations and they greatly outnumber us.

The reason I mention this now, is because one of the last instances of revisionist history that Nick and I regularly discussed was the newfound love around *Sonic Unleashed*. Sonic Team's game was never great, particularly those naff Werehog sections, but more recently there's been a shift in its appraisal. Not by everyone of course, but by enough people that it started to make Nick and I twitch.

Back in 2022 *Sonic Unleashed* was one of many games that received a significant upgrade when running on an Xbox Series X thanks to its Boost Mode. Unlike when it first debuted on the Xbox 360 with a framerate that struggled to consistently hit 30fps, it was now doubled, which admittedly made the game feel quite transformative. Yes, the Werehog stages were still disappointing due to their weak level design and medal collecting, but it was certainly far more fluid and enjoyable to play, and the whispers that *Sonic Unleashed* was actually a great game began to grow.

This reached a crescendo in early 2025 thanks to *Unleashed Recompiled*, an admittedly impressive fan project that adds enhanced resolutions and framerates. The issue though is that many people seemed to think that *Sonic Unleashed* was always like this, when it obviously wasn't and still isn't for those playing the original PS3 and Xbox 360 versions. It's great that newer, powerful hardware can sometimes enhance older games, letting us play them in a fresh light, but it's also important to remember that it's the new console doing this and not the game itself.

ENDGAME

ROLLING THUNDER 3 (MEGA DRIVE, 1993)

» Namco's third and final game in its popular *Rolling Thunder* series was a Mega Drive exclusive that saw WCPO (World Criminal Police Organisation) agents Albatross and Leila teaming up with a brand-new agent called Jay to bring down the evil terrorist organisation Geldra. Will they succeed in their dangerous mission? Let's find out...

01

» Jay's pretty pleased with himself. It's only his first mission for WCPO and he's effortlessly defeated Geldra with the help of Albatross and Leila. The young rookie is already thinking it's time to ask for a promotion.

02

» Silly Jay. While he's pondering about how much of a raise he should ask for, Dread, his seemingly dead opponent, weakly raises himself up. Let's hope Jay kills him before the green-skinned despot can start monologuing.

03

» Being the rookie that he is, Jay keeps his pistol holstered, allowing Dread to taunt the young rookie with the revelation that the self-destruction of the base will happen as soon as Dread's heart stops beating. Silly Jay.

04

» Kaboom! There's a huge explosion and Geldra's base goes up in flames, along with Dread, Jay and the many henchmen that kept the lights up and running while Dread was preparing all his nefarious plans. The insurance payout is going to be astronomical.

05

» With only one unidentifiable body found at the scene of the crime, Jay is presumed missing in action, leaving the rest of the team to mourn his untimely passing. As the credits roll, a mysterious figure drops their gun and walks off into an uncertain future. Maybe Jay wasn't so silly after all.

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